

Dual Language Immersion: Teacher Responds to Questions

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1. How are the two languages/cultures taught in the classroom and the home?

If a student comes from a complete Spanish-speaking background, one hopes that the language of the heritage country is maintained at home. However, often, if the parents have been in the U.S. for a while, they may begin mixing English and Spanish. As soon as the child comes into our school, we emphasize to the parents that to continue to speak only Spanish at home is preferable.

If a student comes from a home where Spanish is the heritage language of only one parent, we encourage that parent to speak only Spanish with the child, and the other only English. Again, it's the mixing of the 2 that results in the child having NO fluent language to draw on.

And, actually, that is the fundamental reason for our program - to allow children to continue to develop their first language to high levels of proficiency while learning a second language.

In the classroom, we teach in Spanish half the day and in English the other half. We try to infuse culture into the physical environment and into the curriculum as much as we can. School-wide, we have bilingual signs, translate most newsletters and a spring multicultural fair, among other things.

2. Is each school subject (math, reading, writing, etc.) taught in both languages or does it vary and is the curriculum in both languages?

We began by assigning each subject area to either the Spanish or the English partner teacher, and we still assign the responsibility for making sure that area of the curriculum is covered to one teacher or the other. But we have found over the years that some parts of the curriculum lend themselves better to one language or the other (For example, although I am in charge of math, and do all of the math assessment for the report card, it just makes more sense for my English partner to teach money in English).

The division changes from grade to grade, too - for example, in kinder I am doing most of the science, but in other grades the English teacher does. We have, then, become very flexible, as, logically, one really can't, and shouldn't, separate areas of the curriculum anyway. At the very least, the other partner teacher should support (for example through compatible literature) what the other is doing. What we never should do is repeat a lesson that was taught in one language in the other (as was (is?) done in some bilingual programs. This causes children not to attend to the lesson in the second language because they know they'll get it later in their first language.

3. I am aware that half of the students in each classroom are native Spanish speakers and the other half are native English speakers. What kind of homework is given and in which language?

Homework from a particular teacher is given in that language, and he/she just needs to make sure it has been explained and practiced enough so the child will know what to do. In kinder, our science homework which requires parent participation, is translated but shared in Spanish in the classroom. Our class newsletters and any other info for parents goes home in both languages.

4. How are students graded and assessed, since they are learning in two different languages?

The students are assessed in each language. In kindergarten, we divide the assessment - I do all of the math assessment (which doesn't mean that my partner does no math, but the parents know anything on the math portion of the report card will be assessed in Spanish). The reading readiness portion is assessed in English (which, again, doesn't mean that I don't cover those skills in Spanish!). We both assess color names and letter names and sounds. We give a common grade for fine motor skills and for behaviors/social skills/work habits. We each give a separate grade for the listening and speaking portion, as this will be quite different depending on the student's first language. You should check with other grade levels for more info on this question.

5. What is the parent's role in their child's education and what options are available for parents (those who know both languages and those who don't) to assist and continue their child's learning?

The parent's role at the beginning is, first, to be committed to the difficult task of transporting their child to and from school every day if, as the majority do, they live outside the school zone!

In kindergarten, the parent's role is to encourage their child to pay attention to the second language teacher and not to get frustrated, to encourage them to use the language with which they are most comfortable to respond to the teacher (ie, don't be afraid to talk to the teacher in the other language), and to make sure they get lots of rest! It's really tough that first month, and continues to be a long, demanding day for the children.

As the children get older, they continue to need encouragement and support, but, obviously, the parents will have to rely on the child to understand the homework in the other language. When we had our initial 5-year grant, we were able to offer ESL and Spanish classes for parents, but this is no longer the case. However, many parents make the effort to learn at least some of the other language on their own. Parents also need to be patient, have a true commitment to second language learning and, if possible, read the research, or at least familiarize themselves with the stages of second language acquisition. A crucial time for parental support is during the transition to middle school and again to high school, when there are so many choices and limited room for electives.

6. What are the benefits and disadvantages of this bilingual/Spanish immersion program?

The fundamental and huge benefits of this 2-way, dual language program are as follows:

- Instead of losing a lot of their first language, the child continues to develop that language so that it will transfer to the second language and aid in the acquisition of that second language.
- Instead of missing a lot of the content because of lack of understanding in the second language, the child is taught content in his/her first language while developing the second language.
- The child develops not just oral proficiency, but literacy in both languages.

Many students maintain their heritage language because the parents continue to speak it at home, but never develop literacy in that language, which is crucial to truly being fluent in the language.

The literacy component is also crucial because the level of language required to read and comprehend a textbook, particularly in the content areas, takes 7-10 years to develop. After third grade, the majority of what is taught is through reading/writing.

There really are no disadvantages to dual language learning, other than for a very small minority of students with language-specific learning disabilities.