

Building Effective Biliteracy Programs

Focus on students' strengths to foster success in Spanish and English.

Teaching in a dual language setting calls on educators to reach deep into their bag of educational skills and tools. Students might speak different languages, but they all need to learn the same concepts. Yet, what often happens is that non-native English speakers are expected to perform like native speakers. Those students may comprehend a topic, but when asked questions, there may be a gap in replying because they lack the knowledge of the language being used.

In that scenario, does silence relay confusion, ignorance or simply hesitancy about replying in a language other than the one they speak at home? How the teacher responds in that situation can make a big difference in how bilingual students' learning progresses and how they view their own capabilities to grow. One of the main goals of bilingual education is to build on the strengths that students bring to school to foster biliteracy and multiculturalism. Empirical evidence has shown that students acquire a second language faster when they are proficient readers in their first language.

"Research has proven over and over again that bilingual kids or kids who are non-native English speakers will do better when you provide an environment where that student is able to express himself or herself in a way that's understandable," explains Liliana Suero, curriculum director at Istation, which produces assessments, curriculum and teacher tools for the dual-language classroom.

To be able to succeed, students need two things, she says. First, they need a "risk-free environment where they feel they can express themselves and they're not nervous about speaking the second language, so they can worry less about how to say something than they do about the content and the academics." Second, "Students need plenty of opportunities to interact with peers in all four language domains: listening, speaking, reading and writing."

The most effective programs, she suggests, are those that allow the students to develop academic knowledge of concepts at the same

time as they're learning the second language. As an example, in the earliest grades, preK-3rd, Spanish-speaking students might receive most of their instruction or content in Spanish with a small portion of learning done in English, including a mix of activities: songs, rhymes, animations, games and fun books to read with many illustrations. In those grades, perhaps only math is done purely in English. The goal is to build on the foundational skills across subjects — like science and social studies — with subsequent grades.

The best approaches are also backed by research. A good example of this is the concept of guided reading, a small-group reading model developed by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell. The basic idea is to expose young readers to books and passages on themes they care about that are at their instructional reading level. Also, they need to be exposed to books that honor their heritage, traditions and culture.

"Books used at the younger levels should be simple to read and provide plenty of visual reference to make sense of the text they read," says Suero. By grades 4 and 5, both passages and teacher-directed lessons are needed to help students gain an understanding of different genre characteristics and give them opportunities for small-group instruction. All of that is relevant to the dual language class.

The Daily 5, a framework created by educators Gail Boushey and Joan Moser to guide learners in becoming independent readers and writers, promotes the regular use of several key components for encouraging students to learn how to read. It starts with looking at the pictures, then reading the words and finally retelling the story. Each of the Daily 5 tasks (Read to Self, Work on Writing, Read to Someone, Word Work and Listen to Reading) can be handled at a separate learning center or station in the classroom.

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Liliana Suero

curriculum director at Istation





How Istation Reading and Lectura Work Together

Istation's reading programs in English and Spanish celebrate biliteracy for elementary school students.

Both Istation Reading and Lectura are built on the science of reading and include formative assessments, instruction, and teacher resources to help educators measure student learning and introduce new reading skills. Each program also includes distinct literacy lessons that are culturally authentic for the language in use. Used together in the dual language classroom, they help students build bridges between English and Spanish to become proficient thinkers, readers, and writers.

Once a month, Istation Reading and Lectura automatically assess the student's overall reading ability in that language, a process that takes about 30 minutes. As the student progresses through the assessment, the program will adapt until the software can pinpoint the specific areas of struggle.

Then Istation augments the teacher's effort by placing the student into a spot of instruction congruent with his or her abilities and allows for additional work on those skills. This doesn't

remove the teacher from the equation but amplifies their efforts.

Given the results of assessments and based on classroom activities' performance, the teacher may choose to work one-on-one with a student needing individual attention, sit down with small groups, or turn to the interactive whiteboard for whole group lessons.

As part of Istation's blended learning approach, downloadable Teacher Directed Lessons (TDLs) are accessible in digital format to accommodate 1-to-1 and/ or small group intervention. All TDLs can be printed out and made available to use in learning centers or stations as well.

Plus, Istation's "decodable books" in English and Spanish in this setting both guide and provide reading strategies for students that can be reinforced in the learning centers format. The books are easy to read since they contain words the students can decode and sight words commonly found in English and Spanish texts.

➤ Explore Istation's Biliteracy Suite

Seven guiding principles for effective dual language programs

The task of choosing a dual language learning program – or enhancing your current program – can feel overwhelming. After all, your choice could profoundly shape students' progress and teachers' work satisfaction! Use this checklist to plan and implement a dual language program that helps students reach their full potential.

- 1 The program is both research-based and fun.**
Research suggests that immersion is the most effective way to develop language proficiency. The best programs are fun and keep students engaged throughout their learning journey.
- 2 The content is culturally rich.**
In other words, the content is clearly related to students' daily lives. For example, a culturally rich language lesson might focus on a familiar holiday, legend, or leisure activity.
- 3 Assessments are adaptive and low-stress.**
The best bilingual programs feature assessments with game-like functionality. Typically students don't even notice that evaluation is underway!
- 4 Data can be sorted to track progress at multiple levels.**
Side-by-side reports on students' progress in each language equip teachers to see which skills are transferring across languages. Reports can show the dual literacy progression of individuals, small groups, classrooms, and campuses.
- 5 Teachers receive high-quality resources.**
This includes full lesson scripts and printables. Teachers are also supported with guidance about ways to form small groups, interventions to implement, and other aspects of differentiating instruction.
- 6 Professional development and tech support are included.**
Educators develop their own knowledge and skills in areas such as classroom management, cultural competence, and language acquisition. Technical support for all aspects of programming is readily available.
- 7 The program promotes at-home use.** Students learn best when they can continue learning at home. The best bilingual programs facilitate these connections by equipping students with books, fun interactive lessons, and other materials to take home.



Teachers from Palm Beach County Schools celebrate reading growth in their Istation red capes.

Helping Teachers Deliver Powerful Dual Language Instruction

The School District of Palm Beach County serves Spanish-speaking students who are learning English, as well as English-speaking students working to become fluent in Spanish. According to dual language instructional specialist Lisa Capra, the district's No. 1 priority is to help students "become fully bilingual and biliterate."

The district's two-way immersion program follows a 50-50 model — core academic instruction is divided equally between languages. Also, English learners and Spanish speaking students come together in the classroom so both groups serve as language "model" and "learner" at different times of the day.

When Capra and her Florida team discovered Istation, they found a tool that could tell teachers exactly what students knew in their first language. As she recalls, "Differentiation in the classroom became easy after that."

"Students bring knowledge and experience with them when they come," says Palm Beach's Capra about dual language learning. "They are not blank slates where teachers have to start all over." Through the use of a program such as Istation,



A student from Harney Elementary School works on Istation's dual language instruction.

teachers can help their dual language students tap into what they bring with them into the classroom. As a result, she says, "Students have an easier time transferring that knowledge to English."

A similar story was unfolding across the country. Teachers at Harney Elementary School in Vancouver, Wash., were on the hunt for an all-in-one assessment tool that would help them measure their dual language students' abilities to listen, read, write and comprehend. A pilot of Istation convinced Principal Lucy Estrada-Guzman of the program's merits. Within just a few months of fully adopting Istation, the educators could identify recurring trends in student progress and map individual growth and skill development. Also, teachers could hold conversations across grades using a common language to talk about assessment and instruction, facilitating much better collaboration.

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