



A Matter of Design

English Learner Program Models in K-12 Education

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Different Approaches to Teaching English Learners

Nearly 5 million students in U.S. primary and secondary schools are classified as English Learners (ELs).¹ The majority were born in the United States, while a smaller share are immigrants.² Though they carry the same label, the needs of these students vary enormously. ELs also attend schools in every conceivable setting: public and private schools, large cities and small towns, and well and poorly resourced districts. Some are educated in communities that support multilingual and multicultural identities, and others are not. All of this variation means that schools take different approaches to helping their ELs develop the language, academic, and cultural skills to succeed.

A great deal of attention has been paid in recent years to how ELs and other groups of traditionally underserved students fare compared to their White, middle-class, and English-speaking peers. Many policymakers and advocates have focused on how students perform on outcome measures such as standardized test scores and graduation rates. However, it is equally important to examine the types of instruction and other services schools provide to improve these outcomes.

Particularly in schools where ELs appear to be making inadequate progress toward English language proficiency and academic achievement, the quality and effectiveness of EL instructional programs may warrant scrutiny. In a time when policymakers, advocates, parents, and other community members are increasingly encouraged to work together with school and district administrators to address persistent achievement gaps, it is critical that these diverse stakeholders have a clear picture of instructional approaches so they can contribute effectively to the dialogue on EL program improvement. This brief provides an overview of the program models most frequently used in U.S. schools to serve ELs' language and academic learning needs in kindergarten through twelfth grade. In addition to outlining the critical features of the most commonly used models, it describes key factors that account for the significant variation in the approaches used within and across schools.

What Are the Building Blocks of EL Program Models?

There are numerous academic studies³ and resources intended for educators and members of the public⁴ that compare EL instructional models in terms of their characteristics and effectiveness. Although these sources generally agree about the fundamental differences between models, readers will find that the terms they use and the ways they describe these models vary.

Most sources differentiate, at a minimum, between bilingual and non-bilingual programs—those that do and do not systematically use students’ native languages as a “partner language” for instruction. A variety of other distinctions between approaches are based on how educators think about questions such as:

- Are graduates expected to develop proficiency and literacy in a partner language (a language other than English)?
- How much instruction is provided in English and how much in the partner language (per day and per year)?
- In what grade may/must students enroll in the program, and for how many years does it last?
- To what degree are ELs and non-ELs integrated in the same classroom for instruction?
- What is the relationship between the EL program and general education (that is, do students spend all day in a specially designed program or just part of the day)?

But even when programs look similar based on educators’ approaches to these questions, they may be called different names since there is no government or education authority that defines these program types nationally. Educators may significantly adapt a model but keep its original name, or they may create new names they believe better represent the approaches they use. Adding to this complexity, students may experience different models at different points during the school day as educators match their needs to appropriate services. For all of these reasons, observers must look beyond a one- or two-word program label to understand what services exist in a school or district, and to whom they are provided.

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The breakdown below shows, broadly, how the three basic EL program types—dual language, transitional bilingual education, and English only—approach the key questions identified above. This table also names some specific program models that fall under each type. These characteristics and models will be described in more depth in the sections that follow.

	Dual Language	Transitional Bilingual Education	English Only
What are the language goals?	Bilingualism and biliteracy in English and a partner language	Proficiency and literacy in English; partner-language proficiency to a limited degree	Proficiency and literacy in English
How much is the partner language used?	At least 50 percent of instruction in elementary, and at least two periods per day in secondary	Initially 50 to 90 percent, tapering to less than 50 percent	Students' home languages may be used informally, but not usually systematically
When does it start and how long does it last?	At a minimum, the program runs K-5, though PreK-12 is recommended	One to five years long, and may start in any grade	As long as needed, may start in any grade
Are ELs integrated with non-ELs?	ELs and non-ELs are integrated in two-way immersion; ELs only in developmental bilingual programs	ELs taught separately until they transition to general education classes	ELs and non-ELs are integrated to varying degrees
What is the relationship between EL instruction and general education?	All classes and content areas covered by the dual language program in elementary; in secondary, this varies by model	Varies, but transitional bilingual programs typically comprise all or most classes and content areas	English-only programs typically include specialist-taught periods or co-taught classes, with ELs otherwise integrated with non-ELs in general education classes
What are some of the program models that fit this category?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Developmental bilingual (also maintenance bilingual, one-way immersion) ▪ Two-way immersion (also dual immersion, dual language immersion) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Early exit ▪ Late exit ▪ Newcomer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Classroom ESL (also ESOL, ENL, or ELD) ▪ Content-based ESL ▪ Co-teaching ▪ Newcomer ▪ Pull out ▪ Push in ▪ Sheltered English instruction (also SDAIE or SIOP) ▪ Structured English immersion

Notes: ESL = English as a second language, ESOL = English for speakers of other languages, ENL = English as a new language, ELD = English language development. In dual language and transitional bilingual programs, the partner language is the language other than English. SDAIE (Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English) and SIOP (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol) are generally known by their acronyms and are two common models of sheltered instruction.

Sources: Center for Applied Linguistics, "Glossary of Terms Related to Dual Language/TWI in the United States," accessed January 25, 2018, www.cal.org/twi/glossary.htm; Kathryn Lindholm-Leary and Fred Genesee, "Alternative Educational Programs for English Learners" in *Improving Education for English Learners: Research-Based Approaches*, ed. California Department of Education (Sacramento, CA: CDE Press, 2010), www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/er/documents/chapter6.pdf; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service, *Language Instruction Educational Programs (LIEPs): A Review of the Foundational Literature* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2012), www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oepd/ppss/reports.html.

Type I: Dual Language Education

The goals of dual language education programs are for students to develop high levels of oral and written proficiency in English and a partner language, academic content knowledge, and cross-cultural competence.⁵ A dual language approach is sometimes referred to as an “additive” model, as students add proficiency and literacy in a new language to the language(s) they speak at home. In contrast, transitional bilingual and English-only approaches are referred to as “subtractive” models because they do not explicitly aim to support continued development in the home language and students may lose native-language skills without this additional support.

In this brief, the term “dual language” is used as an umbrella term for four types of instructional models that differ based on the types of students they enroll:

- ***Developmental (or maintenance) bilingual.*** Students are ELs with a common native language (e.g., Spanish).
- ***Foreign language immersion.*** All students are native English speakers learning a new language.
- ***Two-way immersion (or dual immersion).*** Classes include a roughly balanced mix of students who enter kindergarten primarily speaking the partner language and students who enter speaking mainly English.
- ***Heritage language immersion.*** English is the dominant language for students, but they have a family or community connection to the partner language.

Although these four types of models have many similarities, not all enroll ELs. This guide focuses on the two that do: developmental bilingual and two-way immersion programs. The terminology associated with dual language programs across the United States can be confusing; some communities use the term “dual language” to refer only to two-way immersion programs, and others use it to refer to both developmental bilingual programs and two-way immersion. Some communities refer to any of the three models that only enroll one type of student as one-way immersion to distinguish them from the mixed student groups in two-way immersion classes.

Even within programs that only enroll one type of student, there may be some variation in the language background and skills students bring to the classroom.

In many schools, the students enrolled in these programs do not fall as neatly into language-proficiency categories as the above descriptions suggest; many students enter as balanced bilinguals, and some with fluency in several languages. Thus, even within programs that only enroll one type of student, there may be some variation in the language background and skills students bring to the classroom.

Through almost 50 years of research on dual language programs, experts have identified the following key characteristics of the approach:

- ***An aim of proficiency in both English and another language.*** All students should achieve grade-level or better oral and written proficiency in English and the program's partner language.
- ***Extensive use of the partner language.*** There are two basic dual language models in elementary school. In 90/10 programs, the partner language is used about 90 percent of the time in the early grades, dropping to 50 percent by upper elementary. In 50/50 programs, the two languages are used equally at all grades, and are evenly used for both language arts and other content areas (arts, math, science, and social studies). Some secondary school programs offer just two class periods in the partner language while others continue the 50/50 model.
- ***An early start and duration of at least five years.*** Programs begin by first grade at the latest and extend for at least five years, if not until twelfth grade. Generally, students who do not speak the partner language at home must enroll no later than the end of first grade, but those with proficiency in the partner language may enter in any grade. ELs do not exit the program once they are reclassified as proficient English speakers; rather, students are expected to remain in the program for at least five years to achieve bilingualism and biliteracy.
- ***Integration of ELs and non-ELs in two-way immersion, but not in developmental bilingual programs.*** Two-way immersion programs initially enroll roughly equal numbers of fluent English speakers and ELs who are dominant in the partner language; ELs and non-ELs are integrated for all or most instruction.⁶ In developmental bilingual programs, all students are ELs who speak the partner language at home.
- ***Secondary school students may take some classes through general education.*** Elementary students receive all of their academic instruction through the dual language program. However, in some secondary school programs, only classes offered in the partner language are considered to be part of the dual language program and students take courses in English through general education.

In recent years, dual language programs have become more common across the country. In the process, educators have innovated and adapted a number of elements of their design. For example, some programs separate students by native language for some instruction, while others always keep students together. One recent trend is to use both languages together in some classes (sometimes called bridging or translanguaging).⁷ Programs also differ in terms of whether each class is taught by one teacher who alternates between languages or a pair of instructors who each teach in one language exclusively. And finally, program designers make different choices about whether to teach math, science, social studies, and the arts in one program language or both, and about the length of time to spend in one language before switching to the other (for example, a half day or a whole day).

Although such variations typically do not affect the overall effectiveness of dual language programs,⁸ those in which the partner language is used for less than 50 percent of instruction and/or for fewer than five years are very unlikely to meet the goal of full bilingualism and biliteracy, regardless of how the program describes itself.⁹

Type 2: Transitional Bilingual Education

In contrast to dual language, transitional bilingual education focuses on using students' native languages as a foundation for English learning. Programs typically have the following characteristics:

- ***Some support for the partner language, but English is the focus.*** All students should achieve grade-level oral and written proficiency in English. Classes support the development of academic language skills in the partner language to some extent, but full proficiency in it is not an expected outcome of the program.
- ***Use of the partner language decreases over time.*** Programs generally use the partner language for 50 to 90 percent of instruction in the first year, gradually transitioning to teaching 100 percent in English in later years.
- ***Programs' starting points and lengths may vary.*** Programs that begin in kindergarten are referred to as "early exit" if students transition to English-only instruction after one to three years and "late exit" if they transition after four or more years. Middle and high schools may offer bilingual programming in some or all content areas for students just beginning to learn English.
- ***ELs are not integrated with non-ELs.*** All students in the program are ELs who speak the partner language at home.
- ***EL enrollment in general education may increase with English proficiency.*** Students initially receive all of their academic instruction through the transitional bilingual program. In some programs, especially in secondary schools, students begin to enroll in general education classes as they develop English proficiency.

Transitional bilingual programs that start in late elementary, middle, or high school may be one component of EL support alongside English-only elements such as English as a second language (ESL) and sheltered content courses, discussed below. Some newcomer programs—specially designed programs usually for secondary-school-age ELs in their first year or two in U.S. schools—incorporate transitional bilingual education, while others only provide instruction in English.

Type 3: English-Only Instruction

English-only models are fairly straightforward to define in terms of language goals and use. Such programs generally focus solely on English language development, and few use students' native languages in any systematic way. English-only instruction is the default approach to EL instruction in most states (only a handful of states require schools to offer bilingual education when they enroll a minimum number of students who speak the same native language).¹⁰ Therefore, English-only EL programs are open to students at any grade level who score below proficient on English language proficiency assessments.

Beyond these basics, however, identifying and defining English-only program models becomes more complicated. Some of the terms used to describe these models refer to the role of specialists (that is, ESL teachers or instructional aides) relative to general education:

- **Pull out.** More common in elementary school than in older grades, in this type of instruction a specialist pulls a small group of ELs out of a general education class to work with them on specially designed activities.
- **Classroom ESL.** This model is more common in secondary school. Students are assigned to a class period designated as ESL and taught by an ESL teacher.
- **Push in.** A specialist comes into the general education classroom to help individual or small groups of EL students with activities planned by the general education teacher.
- **Co-teaching.** A specialist and a general education teacher work together to plan and implement daily lessons. Classes may enroll ELs only or integrate ELs and non-ELs.

There are also some situations that straddle the line between pull-out and push-in models. For example, in many elementary classrooms, a segment of English language arts (ELA) instruction is organized in centers, during which students break into small groups and rotate through a series of activities. Typically, within a single room, some centers are led by a teacher, others involve independent group or pair work, and some have students working alone. Schools may take advantage of this time to have ELs work with an ESL specialist. Another example is when schools call EL instruction “push in” because ESL teachers work with small groups of ELs inside the general education classroom rather than in a separate room, even though they are working separately from the non-EL students; in terms of the interaction between ELs and non-ELs, these situations much more closely fit the “pull-out” label.

Other terms used to describe English-only models foreground the skills taught:

- **ESL and similar terms, such as English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), English as a new language (ENL), and English language development (ELD).** Instruction focuses on building oral and written English language proficiency.
- **Content-based ESL.** Instruction is focused on developing English skills but draws on themes and standards from academic content areas (ELA, math, science, social studies, and the arts).
- **Sheltered English instruction.** These content classes are designed to make grade-level academic content comprehensible to ELs. These classes integrate language and content instruction. They may also be referred to by the names of specific model types—Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) and Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) are two of the most common.
- **Newcomer instruction.** Certain individual classes or full programs of study are designed specifically for newly arrived ELs (typically in secondary school). These often focus on basic English language and math skills, and they may include remedial or grade-level academic content. Some newcomer programs include instruction in the native language.

- **Structured English immersion.** Some states (notably, Arizona) use this program model to provide ELs intensive instruction in English language skills for a considerable portion of the school day prior to transitioning into general education classes. Such programs are based on a belief that this accelerates the rate at which students attain English proficiency, although research has not supported this assumption.¹¹

Looking beyond Labels: Trends Shaping English-Only Education

Although these terms for program models are widely used in schools and in state reports to the federal government to describe what schools do,¹² these labels alone do not fully describe how ELs experience instruction over the course of a day and over their school careers. Traditionally, EL services were daily or weekly periods in which small groups of newcomer ELs worked with a specialist on basic conversational English. However, two trends have emerged over the last two decades that have expanded this conception of EL services.

- **New English proficiency tests.** The English language proficiency tests schools use to identify which students are ELs have changed. While earlier tests were designed to gauge conversational English, more recently developed tests measure whether EL students can use academic language to perform as well as their non-EL peers in grade-level general education classes—a much higher bar students need to cross in order to exit the EL program.
- **Educators increasingly prefer integrated classes.** For both social and pedagogical reasons, many educators now prefer to integrate ELs with their non-EL peers for instruction. Particularly for students in middle and high school, improving access to mainstream academic content courses is one strategy to ensure they can accumulate sufficient credits to graduate and gain the knowledge and skills to succeed in life after high school.

As these two trends have gained momentum, ESL specialists and general education teachers have increasingly been viewed as jointly responsible for helping ELs develop conversational and academic language and meaningfully participate in grade-level academic instruction. ESL specialists continue to provide direct instruction to ELs, but their role has been broadened to include supporting them indirectly as well, by working with content teachers to plan instruction that supports English language development within the general education setting.¹³ Consequently, it is no longer enough to label an EL program solely based on how specialists work with ELs during time explicitly branded as “ESL instruction.”

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The table that follows reflects this shift towards thinking of EL services as taking place in both the traditional ESL setting and in general education classes. It sorts English-only EL program models based on two key characteristics: (1) the focus of their curriculum, and (2) the degree to which ELs are integrated with non-ELs in general education instruction.

		What Is the Focus of the Curriculum?				
		English language development	Basic / remedial skills (literacy or math)	Grade-level English language arts (ELA) with language support	Grade-level non-ELA content with language support	Grade-level content without language support
How Integrated Are ELs with Non-ELs?	ELs fully separate (self-contained)	ESL class, ESL pull-out, structured English immersion	EL/ newcomer basic skills class or pull-out	ESL class, ESL pull-out, content-based ESL, co-teaching, newcomer/ sheltered ELA	Newcomer/ sheltered content class, co-teaching, content-based ESL	N/A
	ELs supported by a specialist within the general education classroom	Push-in or co-teaching	Push-in or co-teaching	Push-in or co-teaching	Push-in or co-teaching	N/A
	ELs taught by general education teacher only*	N/A**	Basic literacy or math skills class (or pull-out session including both ELs and non-ELs)	Sheltered ELA (for example, general education teacher uses SDAIE or SIOP approach)	Sheltered non-ELA content (for example, general education teacher uses SDAIE or SIOP approach)	General education***

* ESL specialists may provide support behind the scenes by co-planning lessons with or mentoring general education teachers. Some general education teachers may also have ESL training and credentials.

** Any language instruction in this category would most likely be based on all students' language development needs, not just those of ELs.

*** General education without support ("sink or swim") is not a research-based EL model. It is especially inappropriate for beginner-level ELs, though it is a context ELs frequently experience.

Notes: Non-ELA content includes math, science, social studies, arts, physical education, and elective subjects. ESL may also be referred to as ELD, ENL, or ESOL.

Although the degree to which ELs are integrated with non-ELs in a classroom is signaled to some degree by terms such as "pull out" and "push in," this table shows in greater detail which groups of models provide targeted support to ELs and which support ELs alongside their non-EL peers. ELs may experience more instruction in separate contexts (such as in pull-out ESL or newcomer content courses) in the early years of their English development, and more integration (sheltered content or general education, for example) later on.

What the table above illustrates that traditional descriptions of EL services do not is that EL instruction may take on different forms based on the focus of the curriculum. One way to understand curricular focus is to look at which state standards determine the content taught. Every state has developed standards in the major content areas, such as ELA, math, science, and social studies. These documents indicate the knowledge and skills students should learn at each grade level, and teachers use them to create their curriculum and lesson plans. Additionally, states have adopted English

language development (ELD) standards (sometimes called English language proficiency, or ELP, standards), which indicate the language skills ELs should be able to use at each proficiency level between beginner and fully proficient. These ELD/ELP standards spell out the language skills students need in each of the core content areas—ELA, math, science, and social studies—as well as in conversational English and more general academic language that applies across content areas. The five curricular-focus categories shown in the table above broadly correspond with the following state standards:

Curricular Focus	Corresponding State Standards
English language development	ELD/ELP standards
Basic/remedial skills	Below-grade-level ELA or math standards
Grade-level ELA with language support	At-grade-level ELA standards integrated with ELD/ELP standards
Grade-level non-ELA content with language support	At-grade-level standards in content areas (math, science, and social studies) integrated with ELD/ELP standards
Grade-level content without language support	At-grade-level standards in ELA and other content areas

On any given day and in any given class period, an observer would generally be able to tell which curricular focus and set(s) of standards guided the development of a lesson. Yet the same course might address multiple areas over time. For example, a newcomer math course might start off addressing basic remedial skills but after a few weeks or months turn to grade-level math with language support. Likewise, an ESL pull-out group might focus exclusively on ELD/ELP standards some days but work on grade-level ELA content with language support on other days.

Looking at EL program models through the lenses of curricular focus and whether ELs and non-ELs are integrated highlights important differences in how teachers fit into these models. Teachers with ESL and general education qualifications may play a variety of roles when it comes to supporting ELs in content-area classes. In some states, classes that provide EL-focused instruction must be taught by ESL-certified teachers. This means that sheltered content courses must be taught by a teacher who is dually certified in general education and ESL, or co-taught by a general education teacher and an ESL teacher.¹⁴ In other states, classes that provide grade-level academic content with language support may be taught by a general education teacher.¹⁵ Still, just because a student does not receive direct instruction from an ESL-certified teacher does not mean they are not receiving the help they need; they may be receiving ample language support from a general education teacher who has been trained to provide sheltered instruction. One strategy some districts have adopted to improve ELs’ academic achievement is for ESL teachers to work closely with general education teachers as instructional coaches or to co-plan specific lessons or activities to ensure they are appropriate for ELs.

Because of these variations, when looking at the course schedule of an individual EL student, it may be impossible to identify any one dominant model of instruction. It is common for ELs to be enrolled in classes with a variety of curricular focuses and that are taught by different combinations of educators. For example, a high school student might take an ESL class taught by an ESL teacher, a co-taught ELA class, sheltered social studies and basic math classes taught

by general education teachers, and a general education class in fine arts—five different models of instruction.

Finally, one additional element worth noting is the specialized services students may receive outside of the EL program. These include special education, gifted and talented education, speech and language therapy, and so on, and they can play an important role in the overall education an EL receives. Ideally, these services should be aligned with ELD/ELP standards and provided to ELs by teachers with ESL training or credentials. Importantly, federal rules state that these services must not take the place of instruction focused on helping ELs build English language proficiency.¹⁶

Why Do Schools and Districts Choose Different Approaches?

As the program descriptions above make clear, U.S. schools take a wide variety of approaches to EL instruction. In order to evaluate the appropriateness of a program model, an observer would need to gather information about how it is being implemented and who it is being used to teach. Additionally, it is important to understand how the following factors create opportunities and constraints for schools and districts as they design EL programs.

Student Characteristics and Needs

Ideally, schools should tailor their instructional approach to the characteristics of their students—their age, prior education, and native-language literacy, among other things. There are, however, limits to this in practice. Often, it comes down to the number of students who share characteristics and needs. For example, a school would not be able to implement a transitional bilingual program if it only has a few ELs who share the same home language. Similarly, a student who might benefit from a newcomer math class may have to make do with push-in support in a general education class if he or she is the only student in the school that needs that service.

Teacher Capacity

The fact that the number of students requiring services helps determine what services can be offered feeds into another key factor: teacher capacity. As many schools are staffed based on teacher-to-student ratios, schools with a very small number of ELs might not qualify for a full-time ESL specialist and will need to make decisions about EL program models accordingly. For example, in a school with only five ELs, a specialist might provide some direct ESL instruction two mornings a week, while the general education teacher supports ELs' language development the rest of the time using strategies and materials suggested by the specialist.¹⁷

Other times, it is the availability of qualified teachers rather than the number of students that limits what models can be implemented. A community that lacks bilingual teachers might find it too difficult to staff a dual language program, or they may have to switch from a 90/10 program to a 50/50 program to expand the program and serve more ELs.

Although it is reasonable for schools and districts to consider the availability of resources in planning what EL services to offer, they have a legal obligation to support ELs' development of language and content knowledge to close achievement gaps.¹⁸ Schools that consistently lack teaching capacity might need to offer coursework to train and certify new ESL specialists or expand their recruitment efforts outside their immediate geographic area.

State Policies

State policies that govern EL education may also affect school-level decisionmaking. Some states give schools and districts wide latitude to design their EL instructional programs, whereas others prescribe particular models. Nine states have policies that explicitly require schools to offer bilingual education when feasible and where there is parent support.¹⁹ By contrast, Arizona forbids bilingual education (with some exceptions) and requires structured English immersion.²⁰ Georgia goes further to list which bilingual or English-only models districts may implement, but also allows them to use "an innovative delivery model to be approved in advance by the Georgia Department of Education."²¹

Some states give schools and districts wide latitude to design their EL instructional programs, whereas others prescribe particular models.

In addition to requiring certain models, some states provide guidance on how many minutes of instruction ELs must receive on a daily or weekly basis (usually differentiated by English proficiency level) and what qualifications teachers must have to deliver this instruction. New York State has a particularly robust set of guidelines that describe the number of units (time periods) of standalone ENL and integrated ENL (sheltered instruction) ELs must receive. The state further specifies that standalone ENL must be taught by someone certified to teach ESOL; integrated ENL must be taught by a teacher who is dually certified in ESOL and the relevant general education area or co-taught by one ESOL-certified and one general-education-certified teacher.²² In states that do not have such clear guidelines, it is up to districts to determine what amount of support students will receive and who will provide it.

Research

Another source of information that feeds into decisions about EL program models is educational research. Considerable research has shown that dual language and transitional bilingual approaches are more effective than English-only models, as measured by the academic achievement of ELs.²³ There is less evidence, however, of how the various English-only models (pull out, push in, co-teaching, etc.) compare in terms of effectiveness.

Still, research has pointed to some underlying principles. For example, ELs benefit from explicit instruction on language forms that native speakers use naturally; language is more effectively learned when integrated with stimulating, grade-appropriate content rather than as an isolated set of skills; and ELs benefit academically and socially from being taught alongside their non-EL peers.²⁴

Decisionmaker Attitudes and Goals

Although observers outside the education system might assume that all program decisions are made based on research findings, individual decisionmakers' knowledge and attitudes also play a role. Some might give more weight to research than others, and factors such as personal beliefs and professional experiences contribute to how individuals evaluate research evidence.²⁵ Furthermore, practitioners may not find research convincing or relevant if it was done in a school setting that is significantly different from their own in terms of student need, staff capacity, or state policy.

In some cases, educators make choices to implement programs (or elements thereof) based on their own beliefs or how they understand the beliefs of the community they serve. For example, in spite of evidence of the effectiveness of dual language education, some educators believe that it is not appropriate to teach ELs in any language other than English, or that the local community would not support such an approach. Educators must also weigh the social benefits of integrating ELs into general education classes against the academic benefits of separating ELs for instruction.

Poor Decisionmaking

Finally, observers must determine whether variations in program models are based on good faith efforts to meet ELs' needs or are evidence of poor decisionmaking, whether due to a lack of understanding of the evidence or lack of concern for the program's effectiveness. Often, principals and other administrators are ill-prepared to make informed decisions because they are not trained on EL program design and as a result leave such decisions up to teachers—especially ESL specialists.²⁶ This may result in a program that is well designed but cannot be executed as intended. This may be the case, for example, if a high school's master schedule does not take into consideration the availability of teachers trained to provide sheltered instruction when setting the times during which ELs are to take grade-level content courses. Or, even a carefully implemented model may break down over time if school leadership is not attentive to the need for ongoing teacher training and efforts to monitor and improve the program. At the same time, some leaders fail to tap into the expertise of ESL professionals, especially those who are coordinating and implementing services on a day-to-day basis. These professionals can provide critical input to the decisionmaking process based on their training on effective pedagogical approaches and their understanding of their classroom context and student needs.

Conclusions

As this guide shows, there is a considerable amount of variation in both EL program models themselves and the names different schools give them. Beyond broad comparisons of bilingual and non-bilingual models, and support for approaches such as integrating language and content instruction, there is little research to show which model works best in which context. As parents, community members, and policymakers discuss whether a school is using the best model(s) for ELs, it is important to recognize the many other factors that shape program effectiveness and EL outcomes. To name just a few, these include the quality of teaching and instructional materials, the school climate, and whether teachers receive support for their professional development.²⁷

A close examination of student outcome data can shed light on which program elements merit closer attention or even change. These data are available to the public in a variety of forms, and understanding how to find and use them is the subject of another brief in this EL Insight series.²⁸ Outcome data may be broken down in numerous ways, such as by grade and the length of time a student has been enrolled in U.S. schools. They can be used to understand ELs' development of specific English language proficiency skills, such as speaking and reading, as well as for skills taught in ELA, math, science, and social studies.²⁹ These data, along with other information, can help pinpoint the content knowledge and language skills ELs might need more support, or a different type of support, to develop.

Critically analyzing the design and implementation of a school's EL instructional model is an important step in school-improvement efforts.

With so many variables to consider, it can be daunting to try to understand whether a school or district is offering appropriate instructional services to its ELs. Observers may find it helpful to start with the criteria the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights uses when investigating complaints of insufficient services for ELs—the three-prong Castañeda standard.³⁰ This standard requires that instructional approaches (1) be based on sound theory, (2) be implemented with sufficient resources and in such a way as to be effective, and (3) demonstrate results that show students overcoming language barriers. Federal guidelines also emphasize the right of ELs to access the same rigorous curriculum as any other students, meaning that programs must be designed to help ELs access content that is age and developmentally appropriate.³¹

In short, and with this complex web of factors in mind, critically analyzing the design and implementation of a school's EL instructional model is an important step in school-improvement efforts that aim to boost EL outcomes and ensure an equitable education for all.

Endnotes

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- 9 Howard, et al., *Guiding Principles for Dual Language Education*.
- 10 These include Alaska, California, Connecticut, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, Texas, Washington State, and Wisconsin. See Maki Park, Anna O’Toole, and Caitlin Katsiaficas, *Dual Language Learners: A National Demographic and Policy Profile* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2017), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/dual-language-learners-national-demographic-and-policy-profile.
- 11 Karen E. Lillie, Amy Markos, Alexandria Estrella, Tracy Nguyen, Anthony Trifiro, M. Beatriz Arias, Terrence G. Wiley, Karisa Peer, and Karla Perez, *Policy in Practice: The Implementation of Structured English Immersion in Arizona* (Los Angeles: The Civil Rights Project / Proyecto Derechos Civiles, 2010), www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/language-minority-students/policy-in-practice-the-implementation-of-structured-english-immersion-in-arizona.

- 12 For example, these terms are used in the Consolidated State Performance Reports that states are required to submit each year to the U.S. Department of Education. In these reports, states must indicate which of ten models are used by any of the state's schools: dual language, two-way immersion, transitional bilingual, developmental bilingual, heritage language, sheltered English instruction, structured English immersion, specially designed academic instruction delivered in English (SDAIE), content-based English as a Second Languages (ESL), pull-out ESL, or other. These terms are presented without any definitions. Depending on how they are used in each state, they may not be mutually exclusive. See U.S. Department of Education, "Consolidated State Performance Report: Part I; for Reporting on School Year 2016-17," accessed January 24, 2018, www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/consolidated/csprpart11617.docx.
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Dr. Sugarman came to MPI from the Center for Applied Linguistics, where she specialized in the evaluation of educational programs for language learners and in dual language/two-way immersion programs. At CAL, she directed comprehensive program evaluations of instruction for ELs in K-12, and contributed to numerous research and evaluation projects, including studies of biliteracy development in two-way immersion programs and the evaluation of the STARTALK program which funds teacher training programs and language instruction for students in grades K-16 in critical languages. She also provided evaluation expertise to the Cultural Orientation Resource Center at CAL, where she developed a toolkit to help practitioners assess the effectiveness of cultural and community orientation programs for refugees settled in the United States and collected data on overseas and domestic cultural orientation practices, successes, and challenges through practitioner surveys and learner assessments.

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