



Global Educational Transformation: How Inclusive Dual Language Immersion Practices Positively Impact Student Achievement and Socio-Intercultural Competence

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Abstract

Research supports that students attain higher academic achievement when language instruction is in a child/s native language. (Collier and Thomas, 2012, 2017; Genesee et al., 2005; Thomas and Collier, 2003). (1) Dual immersion programs are beneficial for all students enrolled. Longitudinal research shows higher academic outcomes for all Dual Language Immersion (DLI) students (Collier, V. P., & Thomas, W. P. (2017)).(2) This holds especially true for students of low-income backgrounds, migrant and refugee children, including students with special education needs of all categories of exceptionality.

Dual Language Immersion in Virginia dates back to 1988 and has evolved to include innovative, inclusive Dual Immersion programs. The largest district in Virginia, Fairfax County Public Schools led the way and began their programs in 1989 in French, Japanese, and Spanish. Chesterfield County Public Schools successfully launched four Dual Immersion Programs (French, Spanish, Mandarin, and American Sign Language). These programs have gained huge popularity and community support leading to program expansion to additional sites and languages. Today, Virginia features Dual Immersion programs in 13 counties and 7 languages (ASL, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Korean, and Spanish).

Demonstrating an all inclusive teaching model, presenters share about research, academic gains, biliteracy, and the benefits of socio-intercultural competence development for all students. Presenters showcase two successful DLI implementation examples: the "Global Classroom Project" (Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia) and the Dual Immersion American Sign Language program in Special Education (Chesterfield County Public Schools, Virginia), which is the first all inclusive DLI program in Public Education in the United States.

These unique programs promote inclusive linguistic opportunities, while developing global socio-cultural competencies which serves as a global model for educational transformation.

Keywords: *Biliteracy, High Academic Achievement, Socio-cultural competence, Inclusion, Global Competence, Language Acquisition*

Introduction

Dual language immersion is a growing trend in education, offering students the opportunity to learn two languages simultaneously. This research based approach to education has many benefits (Collier and Thomas, 2012, 2017; Genesee et al., 2005; Thomas and Collier, 2003) Data show increased academic achievement for all students, improved socio-cultural competence, reduced student drop out rates, global competence development, and ultimately increased job opportunities. Additionally, dual language immersion programs promote inclusive practices that create a more equitable learning environment for all students. Inclusive practices in dual language immersion include providing language support



for English learners, teaching both languages, incorporating cultural and global elements into the curriculum, and it promotes cognitive development in all students from all student demographic backgrounds (Collier, V. P., & Thomas, W. P. 2012). These practices ensure that all students, regardless of their language background, have the opportunity to participate and succeed in their studies. By providing a more equitable learning environment, dual language immersion helps to close the achievement gap and create a more inclusive society. Dual Language Immersion in Virginia dates back to 1988 and has evolved to include innovative, inclusive Dual Immersion programs. The largest district in Virginia, Fairfax County Public Schools led the way, starting their programs in 1989, and today offers programming in French, German, Japanese, Korean, and Spanish. Chesterfield County Public Schools successfully launched four Dual Immersion Programs (French, Spanish, Mandarin, and American Sign Language). These programs have gained huge popularity and community support leading to program expansion to additional sites and languages. Today, Virginia features Dual Immersion programs in 13 counties and 7 languages (ASL, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Korean, and Spanish).

Inclusive DLI instruction at OB Gates Elementary School, Virginia

In September 2019, OB Gates Elementary School, Chesterfield County, Virginia, embarked on implementing the [first American Sign Language \(ASL\) Dual Language Immersion](#) program in public school education in the United States. This idea evolved because OB Gates is the center school for students of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) for the entire school district. This low incidence population was segregated by their inability to communicate with their peers in the school setting. Our goal was to provide an inclusive, equitable learning opportunity for our DHH students integrated in the general education classroom. Despite faculty concerns, the DHH Special Education teacher agreed to partner with the lead Kindergarten teacher integrating ASL into the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) curriculum framework. Within two weeks of school, the two teachers were excited to share that their students were already beginning to sign their alphabet and numbers. As the program continued to grow, a designated World Language Teacher for ASL was hired. To date, we have just completed the 4th year of ASL Immersion and will grow to fourth grade during the 2023-24 school year. In addition to being the largest center school for students with disabilities, OB Gates is also one of the few schools to offer a World Language elective for students K-5 once a week in Mandarin. Since the ASL DLI was very successful, OB Gates started the first Mandarin DLI program in Virginia in Kindergarten. This happened during Covid with schools changing instruction to virtual vs. in-person schooling. The data was outstanding in supporting bilingualism and biliteracy in the virtual setting. Students mastered the [Kindergarten curriculum](#) by the end of the school year in Mandarin. The program has been immensely successful and it will be articulated all the way through 5th grade. Our [school community](#) has embraced the benefits of having students develop bilingual education as we continue to grow the [ASL and Mandarin DLI programs](#).

Teaching biliteracy to maximize academic gains at Elizabeth Scott Elementary, Virginia

Also, in Chesterfield County, Virginia, Elizabeth Scott Elementary School students just completed their fourth year of a two way Spanish dual immersion program in 2023, with teachers and administrators being absolutely thrilled with the documented student growth ([Table 1](#)). Elizabeth Scott began their journey by selecting students using a lottery system, and notifying families who registered their children that their children were admitted to the Dual Immersion Program. Right before school started, principal Julie Buntich learned the teacher originally hired as the Spanish Dual Immersion teacher had changed her mind and would not be joining the faculty. Fortunately, one of the fluent bilingual, English/Spanish speaking teachers, reluctantly agreed to take on this role, uncertain of what teaching in a dual language immersion setting would entail. This left the new team with only three days to prepare. Later that year, as students and teachers were just getting comfortable with the program, schools shut down due to COVID. The first group of Kindergarteners missed approximately three months of school. The following year instruction shifted towards a mix of face to face instruction and virtual learning. Despite all obstacles, the instructional team was able to sustain the program throughout COVID, while managing the growth of the program in the primary grades. School administrators and teachers continue to have discussions around scheduling, on who teaches what content, math, science, social studies, and literacy. What has made



students most successful is that Julie Buntich, principal and instructional leader, chose to instruct all aspects of literacy in both English and Spanish every day. To this day, students continue to develop their biliteracy by engaging meaningful learning experiences that deliver content in both languages and with an emphasis on different cultural experiences when appropriate. The approach of dual language immersion provides equitable learning opportunities to all students, and changes the paradigm from intervention to enrichment, from deficit to asset. Dual language immersion students set themselves apart from monolingual learners in their capacity of higher executive functioning skills, higher academic achievement in other content areas such as math and reading, and higher socio-intercultural competence. It promotes a positive school culture and brings the entire school community together. To this day, students continue to develop their biliteracy by engaging in meaningful learning experiences that deliver content FCSP Portrait of a Graduate in both languages, with an emphasis on different cultural experiences. [Elizabeth Scott Elementary School](#) serves as a model school for two way Spanish Dual Immersion in the Commonwealth.

Developing a holistic global learning model: merging Dual Language Immersion and the Global Classroom Project, Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia

Most DLI research has focused on establishing or confirming the academic and linguistic benefits of these programs as quantitative measures are readily accessible. Measures for socio-intercultural or global competency skill development have been more difficult to identify, e.g. the Programme for International Student Assessment ([PISA](#)) added a global competency measure not until their 2018 test. In 2014, Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) developed the [Portrait of a Graduate](#) attributes to provide measures beyond high stakes testing to “empower students to be productive citizens of a global community and successful in the workforce of the future.” ([FCSP 2023](#)). Designing these measures was a critical step for the development of the [Global Classroom Project \(GCP\)](#). The Global Classroom Project partners classrooms in FCPS virtually, with classrooms in other countries, integrating these global opportunities with Dual Language Immersion. The GCP fuses content and language acquisition, global competence skill development, and student-led action on global challenges identified by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Participation in the GCP allows DLI teachers to systematically plan for and measure the development of socio-intercultural competence using the metric provided by the [Portrait of a Graduate](#). Teachers begin the GCP by collaborating with their international partner teachers on project design, student actions, and communication strategies. They devise a plan for collaboration between students that includes expected country specific content, linguistic, and intercultural learning. Together students have the opportunity to build relationships, collaborate, and take action on global challenges at local, national, and global levels. For students who are target language learners, this means the use of language in authentic ways with peers from the target culture. For target language speakers, the GCP provides a continued connection to their own culture or even getting to know another culture within their own language group. For instance, 4th grade students from Great Falls Elementary School connected with their partner class in Nagano, Japan. Both student groups investigated the UN SDG Zero Hunger. Through the Japanese staple food rice, students investigated how different environments affect food sources, its impacts on nutrition and food security, and took action on promoting sustainable agriculture. Since the GCP sets up virtual connections it provides equitable opportunities for all students to connect and collaborate with international peers across linguistic and cultural differences.

Conclusion

Developing biliteracy, intercultural competence and global connections in authentic, inclusive ways, with content and language taught in DLI can be challenging. Competing priorities such as the need to focus on academics, high stakes content testing, and resource allocation constitute continuous challenges and require creative problem solving. Providing inclusive opportunities for all students to develop intercultural and global skills needs a more systemic approach. Creating equitable access for all students to language and intercultural competence should remain a top priority for all schools. Cultivating a more equitable learning environment and access to dual language immersion instruction helps to close the achievement gap, creating a more inclusive society.



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