

Foreign Language Academies of Glendale: A Dual Immersion Case Study



Photo by Ana Lilian

An example of how one school district in Glendale, California has been successfully implementing the dual immersion method in three of its schools.

The Glendale Unified School District has three elementary schools which comprise the Foreign Language Academies of Glendale (FLAG). The one which has been around the longest is Edison Elementary's Spanish dual immersion program which started its first kindergarten class in 2003 and now runs to fifth grade. Keppel Elementary implemented its Korean dual immersion kinder class in 2007 and it currently goes to first grade. Last fall, Franklin Elementary started its German dual immersion program and added both Italian and Spanish programs this fall. *Update: Franklin Elementary is now Franklin Magnet and has added French to its programs.*

How is that for options? Maybe I need to move to Glendale...

Back in March, Ana Lilian had the great fortune to visit the three elementary schools and when she came back from the three-hour long tour, this is what she told me:

"We were in the beautiful German classroom at Franklin Elementary when a 5-year old girl came up to the school's dual-language coordinator to tell her she had written a story in German. I was told this girl speaks Spanish and English at home and had been learning German for 7 months. She spoke to the coordinator in German, showed her a notebook where she had in fact written a story in German, and read it out loud to us. It was amazing."

How it works

For dual immersion programs to actually work, a few things need to be in place. First, the program needs to have the right kind of ratio of students who speak English to those who speak the target language, i.e. Spanish, German or Korean. The way it works in Glendale, at least in the Spanish dual immersion classes, is one-third English-only students, one-third Spanish-only students and one-third bilingual students.

The other important factor is that in order to enroll their children in the FLAG program, parents are asked to make a commitment to stay with the school for the entire duration of elementary education. Otherwise, the program will fail because new kids can't be brought into the program at any grade level unless they already are bilingual. If not, they would be at a disadvantage and defeat the purpose of the whole program.

According to Cristina Allen, FLAG's dual immersion coordinator: "Parents also have to know that their children won't be able to get the full advantage of attending a dual immersion school, if they don't stay all the way through."

All the dual immersion classes within FLAG use the 90:10 model, except for the Korean one — which uses the 50:50 model — because of the complexity of its alphabet, among other things. So students spend 90% of their school day being taught solely in either Spanish or German (and as of this fall, Italian). **Their teachers never speak English leading to some interesting results.**

"You see them helping each other a lot, there's collaboration going on," says Danette Brugger, whose first and second grade daughters attend Edison Elementary's dual immersion program since kindergarten, when describing the classroom's dynamics. "My daughter might ask how to say 'peanuts' in Spanish and one of the bilingual kids will tell her and later on one of the Spanish speaking kids might ask her to explain what something means in English."

As I've said in prior posts in this series: the best of all worlds.

"They are not just hearing the teacher speak the language, but also the other students," explains Allen. "They are learning from each other and that makes all of them feel valuable and capable."

Allen, a former bilingual teacher, goes on to say that the more conventional transitional bilingual programs in California tended to have the attitude that the English language learner was not capable.

"No one ever praised them for speaking Spanish, but I always felt they had an advantage and I let them know it," she says of her days as a bilingual teacher. Thanks to dual immersion programs, though, "they start to see the value of speaking Spanish when they act as translators for the English speaking students in the class."

Another positive consequence has been for those bilingual students who wouldn't speak Spanish even though they understood it. All of a sudden, they become "middlemen" who can use their linguistic abilities to "broker" all kinds of deals in the classroom. It gives them power.

"It's a strong motivator for them," Allen says. "The cool thing is that these "useful" kids are sent over the top very quickly. They are good examples, they show the other students that it is possible and the kind of advantage it brings about. **At a very young age, they are realizing that having two languages opens up new worlds.**"

For Cristina Torres, whose son is a kindergartner at Edison Elementary's Spanish dual immersion program, the advantages are countless. Although both she and her husband are bilingual, Spanish is the language spoken at home. Worried that their son would be fluent in Spanish, but not literate (after hearing the stories of other parents in their same situation who attempted to teach their kids at home, but failed), they were fascinated when they found out about Edison's dual immersion program.

"Our son has evolved tremendously, particularly in the areas of reading and writing," she says. "Plus, his Spanish, when he speaks it, is much more fluent."

Some hurdles to overcome

Unfortunately, not everything is perfect with dual immersion programs. Thanks to policies like No Child Left Behind, there are standardized tests which children are required to take at specific grade levels to quantify their proficiency in certain subject matters. Because for the first two years of their schooling, children in dual immersion programs are taught mostly in the target language, **school officials expect their test scores to be lower at the second and third grade level.** However, they actually start to see a rise in the following grades.

"We make sure parents are aware of this from the very beginning. We show them charts and ask them not to have unrealistic expectations," Allen explains. "They have to know their kids won't do as well as Susy from next door, but in the end, they will know twice as much."

To prevent the "second grade jitters" when parents might start thinking about withdrawing their kids from the program because of impending standardized test required at this grade level, FLAG officials make sure they introduce them to parents with older kids in the program who can talk about how well their children are currently doing. They also provide parents with a lot of research which proves that eventually, kids in this type of program will score higher than their monolingual peers.

Another one of the problems is not so much recruiting good bilingual teachers, but more **finding appropriate books in the target language. Spanish translations of textbooks are easy to find, but most of them are translated inappropriately. German and Korean translations are near impossible to find.** They can't buy books from the native country because they have to follow U.S. standards. What ends up happening is that the teachers have to dedicate more time to translating and preparing the course work. Thus, they end up spending much more time at work than a regular teacher, but no extra pay. **In the end, it's a labor of love.**

What parents can do

All those interviewed for this piece, agreed that the only way for dual immersion programs to succeed is for parents to be involved.

"I would highly recommend this program, as long as parents understand their involvement is crucial," says Cristina Torres, mom to a kindergartner at Edison Elementary. "I believe the amount of involvement you are willing to commit to will make the difference between your child's success and failure."

Adds Danette Brugger: "The fact that parents chose this program for their kids usually means that they are more engaged, they tend to care a bit more about their children's education and its quality, and that's never a bad thing to have in your school, it's a real plus."