

Utah's Dual Language Immersion Program: Access to Multilingualism

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Abstract: In this article, we discuss the context, key features and vision of Utah's dual language immersion (DLI) programme. Students in this programme spend half of the school day learning subject matter in English, and the other half learning in a target language. Utah's DLI programme started in 2009 with 25 elementary schools and three target languages (Chinese, French and Spanish) and is supported by legislative funding. In the autumn of 2017, 200 schools in 22 districts across the state will offer dual language immersion in Chinese, French, German, Portuguese, Spanish, and for the first time Russian. Schools and districts that participate in dual language immersion commit to implementation that complies with the state model. We explain the model's key features and discuss the central role of collaboration between public and higher education to realise the vision of articulated language education.

Keywords: dual language immersion, academic achievement, language policy, bilingual education, Anglophone context/USA

Introduction

On February 28, 2017, the American Academy of Arts & Sciences (AAAS) released a report on the status of language education in the United States. The report was created at the request of a bipartisan group of U.S. senators and representatives, who asked the following questions:

How does language learning influence economic growth, cultural diplomacy, the productivity of future generations, and the fulfilment of all Americans? What actions should the nation take to ensure excellence in all languages as well as international education and research, including how we may more effectively use current resources to advance language learning? (AAAS, 2017: v)

Referring to the most recently available U.S. Census Bureau data, the first paragraph of the report's executive summary concludes that "the vast majority of American citizens remain monolingual" (viii). According to the Census Bureau, only a small fraction of the country's 65 million multilingual residents are able to use their non-English home language proficiently. Moreover, opportunities for learning languages have decreased, particularly at the elementary and middle school levels. In most states in the U.S., less than 20% of K-12¹ students were enrolled in language courses in 2015 (AAAS, 2017: 11).

¹ Kindergarten to Grade 12 (ages 4-17). Grade 12 represents the last year of compulsory school education.

In a nation that the AAAS report characterises as “stubbornly monolingual,” Utah has emerged as a leader in dual language education, with nearly 40,000 students in 192 elementary and secondary schools to be enrolled across the state in 2017-2018. Though this number amounts only to just over 6% of Utah’s entire student population, it represents dramatic growth from the 25 dual language immersion (DLI) schools launched eight years prior in 2009. More importantly, DLI schools are located in 22 of Utah’s 44 public school districts in urban and rural areas across the state, with new schools and also districts being added every year. Currently, Utah’s immersion languages include Chinese, French, German, Portuguese and Spanish; the first Russian school will open in the autumn of 2017.

The following sections will first present the history of Utah’s DLI program and then discuss key components, including the overarching public and higher education alliance. The final section will address challenges and the state’s vision for the programme’s future.

Utah Dual Language Immersion: Background

Prior to the creation of its DLI program, Utah had offered bilingual education for some 30 years without sufficient funding or infrastructure (Leite and Cook, 2015). In 2008, Utah Senate Bill 41 established DLI as a pilot to be officially launched the following year with eight Chinese, five French, and twelve Spanish programs in 25 schools. The initiation of DLI was buoyed as stakeholders from across the state united from 2007 to 2009 to focus on language learning. Leaders in education, business and government participated in three language and international education summits that were designed to create a shared vision for Utah’s language education policy. The recommendations that emerged from the summits are captured in the Utah Language Roadmap for the 21st Century, which articulates the goal of “creating a dynamic language education structure to support the development of a highly skilled and advanced multilingual student population focusing on professional competence in at least one world language other than English, preferably two” (Utah Language Roadmap, 2009: 4).

The summit conversations leading up to the Roadmap had crystallised that the key to students achieving professional competence in a language other than English would be early language study that is built into school curricula and articulation across educational levels. The most unique aspect of the Utah Roadmap is its state-wide K-16² articulation vision, with Utah students beginning world language study in a dual language immersion program in elementary school, continuing through middle/junior and high school, and arriving in higher education with advanced proficiency. This K-16 vision is the foundation of the Utah program and will be addressed later on, after a discussion of the critical aspects of Utah’s DLI program, including implementation, assessment, infrastructure, and funding.

² K-16 (Kindergarten to Grade 16) is a movement in the United States that considers both compulsory (i.e. nursery, primary, and secondary) education and the first four years of post-compulsory education systems together, with the aim to create aligned policy and practice in examination practices, graduation requirements, admissions policies and other areas.

Utah Dual Language Immersion: Program Components

Uniform implementation of Utah's DLI model plays a critical role in the program's success. Every DLI program that receives state funding has to document compliance with a set of nine assurances, starting with the state's 50/50 two-teacher model. 50/50 refers to the allotment of time, with half of the school day taught in English and the other half taught in the target or partner language. The English teacher and the target language teacher work together as a team to execute the curriculum and plan lessons. Critically, however, the content learned during each half of the school day is complementary, not duplicating. For example, in grades 1-3 (ages 7-9), maths is taught almost exclusively in the target language, e.g. Chinese, French or Spanish, while the English half of the day is devoted to English language arts and focused subject matter vocabulary reinforcement. In addition to defining instructional models for different grade ranges (e.g. grades 1-3 or 4-5) and requiring the collaborative two-teacher model, the fidelity assurances³ also stipulate 100% target language use by the target language teacher, enrolment open to students of different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds and ability levels, and participation in state-sponsored professional development (Utah State Board of Education, 2016).

Crucially, all schools are required to participate in outcomes measures, including target language proficiency assessments. Like all Utah elementary schools, those that house a DLI programme are held accountable for students' performance on standardised tests in English language arts, math and science. While large-scale accountability measures of these core subjects are the norm in the U.S., systematic assessments of world language are the exception. Utah, however, has made a significant investment in measuring DLI students' progress toward proficiency. Working backward from the stated goal of students reaching the advanced level of proficiency (ACTFL,⁴ 2012) by the end of secondary schooling, Utah has established performance benchmarks for each grade level from 1-12. DLI students' speaking, listening, reading and writing competencies are assessed at frequent intervals with formative, on-going classroom assessments as well as summative assessment through annual standardised tests.

Together, academic achievement and proficiency measures not only hold the DLI programme (and districts and schools) accountable, but are critical to making requests for the continuation or increase of funding successful. With research studies demonstrating that DLI students are performing at the same or higher levels in English language arts and math (Watzinger-Tharp et al., 2016), and 80-90% of DLI students meeting or exceeding proficiency benchmarks across skills and languages (Watzinger-Tharp & Rubio, 2016), DLI leaders have been able to make their case for funding that will not just sustain the programme, but also support growth.

³ *Fidelity assurance* means that the school agrees to adhere to the teaching methodology and administrative requirements set out by Utah's DLI programme

⁴ American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages: [ACTFL](http://actfl.org) is a national, individual membership organisation dedicated to the improvement and expansion of the teaching and learning of all languages at all levels of instruction and all education sectors.

The initial legislative appropriation of \$750,000 for the DLI pilot has increased every year. Since the two-teacher model is such that schools need not finance new positions, school level funding is principally used for the acquisition of instructional materials. Funding allocations to districts and to the State Board of Education support the programme's significant infrastructure and a wide range of professional development activities. It should also be noted that Utah has leveraged legislative funding to obtain federal grants, which, in turn, have further helped advance DLI in Utah.

With this legislative funding, the Utah State Board of Education has been able to create the requisite infrastructure to implement the programme with fidelity, provide training and support for teachers, effectively coordinate with school and district administrators and engage parents. One of the most significant infrastructure pieces is Utah's DLI leadership team made up of experts in dual language and teacher education. Their principal charge is to promote excellent instruction that is firmly grounded in language acquisition and dual language immersion research. A group of highly trained and experienced professionals, they educate and support target language and English teachers, provide regular professional development, and also oversee an annual pre-service institute for DLI teachers in their first and second year of teaching. In addition they hold semi-annual meetings with key stakeholders and organise regular parent meetings in schools and at the district level. These activities are designed to establish foundational understanding of dual language immersion and its benefits and to generate buy-in from all stakeholders.

Utah Dual Language Immersion: K-16 Alliance

One of the unique aspects of Utah's DLI programme is close cooperation across the entire educational spectrum to achieve the goal of articulated language teaching and learning from primary to postsecondary education. This alliance, spanning grades K-16 (kindergarten through bachelor's degree) has spurred productive practitioner/researcher partnerships. DLI practitioners who are leaders in DLI education and researchers with expertise in second language acquisition, pedagogy and teacher education develop and implement curriculum and assessments, train teachers and carry out collaborative research.

Utah took a significant step toward its goal of articulating language study across educational levels in 2015 when the alliance succeeded in requesting new legislative funding for the continuation of dual language immersion up to and including Grade 12, the senior year of high school. With this funding, Utah has established the so-called *Bridge Program* with upper-level university courses offered in grades 10, 11, and 12 for students typically 15-17 years old. Students who complete all three courses will obtain a total of nine credits, just six credits short of a university language minor⁵. Seven Utah public universities agreed to the bridge concept and, more importantly, to accept courses for

⁵ Academic minors and majors differ in that the former is subordinate to the latter. Some students use the minor to make themselves more attractive to employers, e.g. by gaining a minor in a modern language.

upper division college credits. High school teachers and university language department faculty and chairs conceptualised and designed the *Bridge Program* over the course of two years (2014-2016). This year (2016-2017), students are completing the inaugural Spanish bridge course, offered in two school districts and team-taught by university and high school instructors. In the coming years, three upper-division language courses will be specially designed for each of Utah's DLI languages and offered on a three-year rotation to DLI students. Beyond the concrete and tangible benefit of college credits, the bridge courses create a space for students to imagine themselves as college students. This opportunity to envision college is particularly important to student populations underrepresented in post-secondary education, including students with heritage language backgrounds or lower socioeconomic statuses. The *Bridge Program* and, more broadly, the K-16 alliance, highlight the ultimate purpose of Utah's DLI programme to prepare students for success in college, and in life as global citizens.

The Utah K-16 alliance transcends boundaries between public and higher education that have persistently prevented language education from progressing seamlessly from elementary through middle/junior and high school and, finally, to college education. To be sure, bringing together two distinct educational cultures creates a unique set of challenges. The emphasis on outcomes assessments and accountability in public education might prompt concerns about academic freedom among university educators; and when post-secondary educators highlight literary and cultural studies, educators in middle and high schools worry about accessibility and appropriateness of courses and materials. In order to remove barriers between educational levels, we had to learn each other's cultures and languages.

Challenges

Implementation fidelity, outcomes assessment, funding and infrastructure, and alliances across the educational spectrum have been vital for the stability and sustainability of Utah's DLI programme. Of course, the programme also faces challenges: some unique, some inherent in dual language education in general, and others related to broader educational and societal contexts.

All dual language immersion programmes face the challenge of hiring and retaining qualified teachers with the requisite professional credentials and linguistic capacity. However, the enormous scale of instructional needs makes Utah unique. As noted earlier, Utah's DLI programme has grown from 25 pilot schools in 2009 to 162 in 2017. With some 30-35 new schools anticipated for 2017-2018, the number of DLI schools in Utah will be close to 200 with approximately 40,000 students. Since the supply of domestic teachers is not sufficient, Utah recruits international guest teachers who are licensed and have teaching experience in their home countries to fill positions at new and continuing schools each year. In addition to bringing experience and skills, they enrich schools and communities with their cultural and linguistic diversity. However, cross-cultural differences, in particular those related to educational principles and philosophies, pose significant challenges, even if training and guidance are provided for all involved parties. Moreover, an international teaching force inherently increases staff

turnover, requiring districts and schools to hire and train new cohorts more frequently. The scale of Utah's DLI programme, which makes the opportunity to become bilingual and biliterate available to a growing population of students, also increases pressure on the programme's infrastructure and resources. The state will have to continue to balance growth, resources and programme quality.

Not unique to Utah's DLI programme, or to dual language education, is the challenge of collecting and maintaining systematic and reliable data for accountability measures and research. For dual language immersion, this translates, first, into demonstrating that learning in two languages does not put students at an academic disadvantage in English or other elementary school core subjects (math and science) that are tested in English. Studies conducted in Canada and in the U.S. have consistently found that dual language immersion can benefit students' academic achievement (e.g. Collier and Thomas, 2004; Lazaruk, 2007; Marian, Shook and Schroeder, 2013; Steele et al, 2016). Similarly, recent studies have shown that students in DLI programmes attain higher levels of target language proficiency than students in traditional four-year programmes (e.g. Burkhauser et al., 2016; Fortune & Tedick, 2015).

Utah has to demonstrate that its DLI model, particularly because it has been implemented state-wide, yields similar results. Though school and student demographic and performance data are generally collected at the state level, tracking of DLI students was initially left to school districts. Early on, the absence of a centralised mechanism created some obstacles to conducting research to measure effects of DLI on student achievement. However, over time, data collection processes have been refined and are facilitating a comprehensive DLI research agenda.

Future Plans and Vision

Two legislative bills have provided critical funding for elementary dual language immersion and the bridge programme for continued language study at the secondary level. It is now time for stakeholders' attention to turn to post-secondary education. Students who graduate from high school with advanced language proficiency expect educational opportunities that capitalise on their high skill levels. Utah colleges and universities will have to rethink their approach to language education, which has operated under the assumption that students arrive with low levels of proficiency. Such low expectations have perhaps underestimated the abilities of populations such as heritage speakers. Certainly, they will also do a disservice to students who have completed DLI and the bridge programme. How will these students be served best?

Two programmatic frameworks guide the state's vision for language study that is integrated with content (as in CLIL) and prepares students for using their language skills in academic and professional careers. A number of U.S. institutions, including the University of Utah, are members of the nation-wide *Cultures and Languages across the Curriculum* consortium ([CLAC](#)), which promotes content-focused language study outside the traditional language classroom to advance students' linguistic and cross-cultural competencies. The University of Utah has started a pilot programme to offer CLAC

courses in multiple languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Spanish, in conjunction with disciplinary courses in, for example, History, Film Studies, Political Science and Public Health that are taught in English. Students read and discuss target language material that is tied to the disciplinary course content in order to advance their language skills and to broaden their cross-cultural perspectives. The state aims to develop a full cohort of regularly taught CLAC courses in conjunction with disciplinary courses, or as stand-alone classes. Long-term, CLAC will then evolve into double degrees that fully integrate language with academic or professional degrees.

The second framework focuses on students reaching high levels of language proficiency through intensive language study at home and abroad. Known as the Language Flagship, this competitive federal programme funds the development and implementation of innovative undergraduate curricula that will take students to a superior level of proficiency tied to a career trajectory, for example in engineering, medicine or law. With limited opportunities for early language study in the U.S., this ambitious goal has only been attainable for a small population, such as students with extensive experience outside the U.S. or a bi-national or bicultural background. The Utah DLI programme and the bridge courses, in contrast, are setting expectations for students to enter college at the advanced level, making high advanced or even superior proficiency an achievable reality. We will have to determine if the Language Flagship, and the CLAC programme, can be replicated on the scale of Utah's DLI programme, engaging with thousands of students, to produce global citizens with professional expertise and superior language proficiency.

Conclusion

As pointed out by the AAAS report cited in the introduction, the majority of citizens in the U.S., a country of immigrants, are monolingual or barely proficient in a language other than English. In other words, the presence of multiple languages in U.S. society has failed to advance multilingualism among individuals. This gap between societal and individual multilingualism is not uncommon in societies with a dominant majority language. Not surprisingly, native speakers of English in the U.S. are less inclined than minority language speakers to acquire another language. Being a native speaker of a globalised language, one might argue, turns out to be both a blessing and a curse. English as a default lingua franca diminishes the motivation of monolingual English speakers to seek proficiency in a second language.

In Utah, DLI as a state-wide model has altered the monolingual mindset that is pervasive in U.S. education and in public discourse. The 5th International Conference on Language Immersion Education, held in Salt Lake City in 2014, was built around the theme of "mainstreaming access to multilingual communities." The theme acknowledged that citizens around the world, in the U.S. and in Utah live and work in multilingual societies. It also deliberately mirrored Utah's long-term goal to "provide a world of opportunities for students" by mainstreaming dual language immersion programmes throughout the state's public education system. While challenges still lie ahead, Utah is well on its way to making this ambitious goal a reality.

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