

Designing Preschool Programs that Foster Bilingualism: A Guide for Preschool Directors

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Young children’s brains are wired for language development. The development of language is one of the major developmental tasks of early childhood and is deeply entwined with cognitive development and social development (interaction). Children have the capacity to acquire more than one language simultaneously; and those who are exposed to two languages (or more) in the early years can grow up fluent in multiple languages if they are encouraged to do so and if exposure to those languages is consistent and they actively interact with authentic users of those languages. In fact, the years 0–8 are a very specific window of opportunity for gaining the benefits of bilingualism. The simultaneous development of two or more languages actually strengthens each language, and bilingualism is associated with enhanced cognitive skills, executive functioning, social-emotional health, and academic outcomes.

For children whose home languages are not English, bilingualism is not just an enrichment, it is essential for access and participation in their multiple language and cultural worlds. Becoming proficiently bilingual for them is, however, a complex process and a vulnerable one. Bilingualism does not simply develop because they are exposed to two languages. Those who attend English-only preschools (and schools) too often experience a subtractive process of home language loss as they immerse in English—and with that loss comes the rupture of connection to family and heritage, a missed opportunity to leverage the power and benefits of bilingualism, and the process also undercuts overall language development.

For this reason, quality early education as a bottom line affirms and supports Multilingual Learners’ (MLs) connections to their home language as English is introduced—and affirms the value of bilingualism for all children, providing opportunities where possible to expose children to multiple languages. It requires more than affirmation, however, for children to actually develop bilingually. Bilingualism does not just occur because children are exposed to several languages or just because they receive affirming messages about the value of bilingualism. To actually support children in developing the skills of bilingualism, a more intentional planned language approach to dual language development is required. This is the purpose of dual language/bilingual programs in preschool.

What is a dual language/bilingual preschool program?

Early Childhood Education (ECE) dual language/bilingual programs play an important role in the development of bilingualism by:

- setting specific goals for bilingual development (in both the home language and in English);
- providing staff who serve as the language models in each language;
- defining how the two languages will be used in instruction and throughout the program to build language skills in each language and to build cross-language awareness;

- structuring the day and week to ensure adequate exposure to each language;
- working to equalize the status of the languages to offset home language-loss and build proud bicultural bilingual identities;
- supporting families to understand and appreciate the bilingual journey and the long-term benefits for children, engaging them as partners in both affirming and building on their home culture and language as well as supporting their children in becoming bilingual;
- creating a language-rich learning environment and providing materials to support language learning in both languages, and;
- integrating bilingualism into all aspects of the curriculum and across all domains of development.

All of this is defined in a planned language approach—also called a Bilingual Language Program Design. There are a variety of effective models but all provide a minimum of 50% of the day in the language other than English and a minimum of 10% of the day in English. Basic principles of instruction and bilingual development are shared across these models. See the [CDE Biliteracy Pathway Recognitions](#).

The basic dual language/bilingual preschool program models include:

- **Mostly Target Language/Partner Language Programs:** A “90:10” or “80:20” dual language model emphasizes development of the language other than English (sometimes called the Target Language or the Partner Language) for 80 or 90% of the day, with exposure to and immersion in English for the remaining 10–20%. This establishes a strong foundation in the Target Language upon which English is built. A 90:10 is workable in an all-day program, and in a community where children already have some exposure to English outside of the program. For more linguistically isolated communities with little English exposure outside of the program or for half-day programs, an 80:20 provides for a more appropriate exposure to English.
- **Balanced Bilingual Program:** A “50:50” dual language model divides time evenly between the Target/Partner Language and English. It may be 50:50 balance within a single day (workable in a full day program), or across the week (more feasible in a half day program). See sample schedules below. If dividing the day into 50% English and 50% Target Language, it is important to regularly switch which language is done in the morning and which in the afternoon so that routines occur across the week in both languages. A 50:50 model is somewhat more challenging to plan than a “Mostly Target Language/Partner Language Program” because the curriculum needs to be prepared in both languages. It also provides the minimal immersion in the Target/Partner language needed to support bilingualism, and care must be taken that the “minimum” of 50% in that language does not become eroded.

Sample daily or weekly schedules for a 50:50 Model

Balanced 50/50 Model by the Day				
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
AM: Vietnamese (50% of the day)	AM: English (50% of the day)	AM: Vietnamese (50% of the day)	AM: English (50% of the day)	AM: Vietnamese (50% of the day)
PM: English (50% of the day)	PM: Vietnamese (50% of the day)	PM: English (50% of the day)	PM: English (50% of the day)	PM: English (50% of the day)

Balanced 50/50 Model by Week

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Vietnamese (90% of the day)	English (90% of the day)	Vietnamese (90% of the day)	English (90% of the day)	Vietnamese (90% of the day)
English (10% of the day)	Vietnamese (10% of the day)	English (10% of the day)	English (10% of the day)	English (10% of the day)

Note that a mostly English-instructed program that provides some home language support and affirmation of bilingualism is a positive program but is not considered a dual language/bilingual program because it does not actually provide sufficient intentional language development in both languages to result in bilingualism.

We are interested! We are ready! Where do we begin?

Building a dual language/bilingual preschool program begins with articulating a clear vision and goals for bilingualism, and then proceeds to selecting an appropriate program design for language allocation that addresses the cultural and linguistic contexts of the community and matches the staff capacity of the program. Once the planned language approach model has been defined, attention focuses on building the capacity of staff and supporting them to implement the model, providing high-quality language experiences and resources for the development of each language, and partnering with families in a shared commitment to develop bilingual and bicultural children. These are all tasks for program leadership. This step-by-step guide is designed, then, for ECE program directors and leadership teams as an overview of the components of building an effective and quality developmentally appropriate dual language/bilingual preschool program.

It is organized into five focus areas:

- **Focus Area A:** Articulating and Setting a Program Vision and Goals for Bilingualism
- **Focus Area B:** Selecting an Appropriate Bilingual/ Dual Language Program Model (*bilingual planned language approach*)
- **Focus Area C:** Dual language Instruction, Curriculum, Assessment, and Pedagogy
- **Focus Area D:** Building Capacity and Supporting Staff
- **Focus Area E:** Family Engagement/Partnership

FOCUS AREA A:

ARTICULATING AND SETTING A PROGRAM VISION AND GOALS FOR BILINGUALISM

Effective dual language/bilingual preschool programs hold and clearly articulate an assets-based vision that explicitly communicates the program's beliefs, commitment, and goals for bilingual education, including proficiency in two languages, active learning in and through two languages, cross cultural competence, and strong bilingual/bicultural identities.

TASKS

- Inform yourself. Familiarize yourself with research and resources on bilingual development in the early years, dual language programs, and effective bilingual instructional support for children ages 3–8. For resources, see the “RESOURCES FOR LEARNING MORE!” box with links.

RESOURCES FOR LEARNING MORE!

Resources available from Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center (ECLKC)

- [Intentional Language Supports in the Preschool Classroom Video](#)
- [Updating Classroom Language Models in a Planned Language Approach](#)
- [Supports for Classroom Language Models for All Children: Step-by-Step Guide](#)
- [Classroom Language Models: A Leader’s Implementation Manual](#)
- [DLL Joint Policy Statement](#)

Resources available from the California Department of Education (CDE)

- [Preschool English Learners: Principles and Practices to Promote Language, Literacy and Learning](#)
- [Biliteracy Pathway Recognitions Webinar](#)
- [Biliteracy Pathway Program Flyer in English](#)
- [Paths to Biliteracy Bookmark](#)

Resources available on the Multilingual Learning Toolkit

- [Multilingual Learning Toolkit Alignment with the English Learner \(EL\) Roadmap](#)
- [Strategy: Budding Bilinguals Celebrations / Celebraciones para los estudiantes bilingües](#)
- [Video: Dual Language Programs Explained](#)
- [Blog: 5 Steps for Ensuring That Your Dual Language Program Is Still A Strong, Equity-Based Dual Language Program](#)

Videos of Dual Language/Bilingual Classrooms from the SEAL Model

- [Preschool Thematic Unit - Redwood City | Preschool integrated thematic “Farm” unit implemented in a Mostly Target Language 90:10 bilingual preschool classroom using the SEAL Model.](#)
- [A Dual Language Preschool Classroom | An integrated thematic “Pumpkins and Harvest” unit implemented in a “Balanced” 50:50 dual language preschool classroom using the SEAL Model.](#)
- [SEAL Preschool Environment & Families | A preschool classroom implementing an “Insects” theme integrating language development with science content in a bilingual 90:10 program, focusing on the use of the outdoor environment, language and content-infused learning and play centers indoors, and family connections.](#)

- Invite members who represent the cultural and linguistic diversity of the community (e.g., families, teachers, staff, and key members of the early childhood community and local districts with dual language programs) to engage in a Dual Language Workgroup and/or create other input and response mechanisms so they can contribute to the process of developing the bilingual/dual language vision and goals.
- Support members of the Dual Language Workgroup to become knowledgeable about the benefits of bilingualism in early childhood, familiar with the community being served, and understand the research and models of dual language program approaches.
- Develop a written program vision and goals statement that clearly articulates the program’s aspirations for dual language development. (*What are you seeking as a result of your program for your children’s language skills? Why is this important for this community?*)
- Meet with leadership and staff of local K–12 dual language/bilingual programs to engage in dialogue about creating a coherent and aligned pathway and continuum from the preschool dual language/bilingual program to and through elementary grade dual language programs to envision together a successful journey to full biliteracy attainment.
- Share the vision statement and goals of the program throughout the community!

THREE EXAMPLES OF VISION/MISSION STATEMENTS FROM DUAL LANGUAGE/BILINGUAL PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS:

1. **Mission Statement:** The mission of our program is to provide young children opportunities to learn and grow in a bilingual, multicultural environment that celebrates the integration of mind, body, and spirit as the cornerstone of success and happiness in our global economy.
2. **Vision Statement:** Our commitment is to provide a preschool program that supports the development of both the home language and a second language (English), builds on young children’s linguistic assets as the foundation for bilingualism, values and nurtures young children’s dual-language capacities as central to their lifelong identity as bilingual and bicultural individuals, provides intellectually rich instruction and child-initiated playful learning experiences to nurture children’s learning and development across domains, and that partners with families to support learning at home and in school.
3. **Vision Statement:** Our program is designed for students to develop a strong foundation for language and literacy development in Spanish and English through optimal play-based learning experiences.

FOCUS AREA B:

SELECTING AND DEFINING THE BILINGUAL/DUAL LANGUAGE PROGRAM MODEL

There is no one single “most effective” dual language/bilingual program design that works for all preschool contexts. Successfully implementing a dual language model requires selecting a program model that is a good match for your community context, realistically matches your staff capacity to implement effectively, and infuses the focus on bilingualism throughout all components of the program in a program-wide approach. The goal is to ensure that the allocation of each language for teaching and learning is sustained (and coherent) and provides sufficient exposure and immersion in English so children learn the new language, while ensuring sufficient support and development of the home language to continue to develop the language.

TASKS

- In order to determine which model you have the capacity to implement effectively, survey the language skills and capacity of your staff. Are there staff with sufficient proficiency and confidence in the Target/Partner Language (the language other than English) to teach almost all day in that language as is necessary for a 90:10 or 80:20 program? Do you have monolingual staff who can only teach and support in English? (*If so, a 50:50 language allocation works better because those English-only staff can be paired with a fully bilingual proficient speaker of the Target Language*). Determine if you will need to recruit and hire new staff with the capacity to provide high quality bilingual modeling and instruction.
- In order to determine which model best matches the language needs of the children you serve, conduct a survey of the home languages of the children in your community. Are there many children who are monolingual in a language other than English? Which language(s)? Are many children growing up in bilingual settings with exposure to more than one language? Generally, how much English exposure is there in the community? If it is primarily a linguistically isolated community with little English exposure and sharing a home/community language other than English, an 80:20 model may be indicated. If they are mostly growing up with bilingual exposure including exposure to English in the community and home, in addition to a language other than English, a 90:10 may be indicated.
- To infuse the focus on bilingualism program-wide, review program policies and procedures and determine how to integrate a focus on cultural and linguistic responsiveness throughout all aspects of the program (e.g., recruitment and orientation of new families, classroom placement, curriculum selection and planning, family education and partnerships, nutrition and health, assessment, observation and documentation, etc.) Engage all staff in dialogue about what it means to embrace the goal of bilingual development program-wide.
- Create a written description of your Bilingual/Dual Language Preschool Program model that clearly describes the language allocation approach, and articulates the procedures and policies regarding classroom assignments and staffing related to implementing the language model.
- Ensure that the commitment to bilingualism and a description of how the dual language approach impacts all aspects of the program is addressed in the Program and Parent Handbook, and is infused in recruitment and orientation materials for families.

FOCUS AREA C:

DUAL LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION, CURRICULUM, ASSESSMENT, AND PEDAGOGY

Effective dual language/bilingual preschool programs adhere to basic principles of bilingual pedagogy and instruction. Staff understands these principles, and shape their instruction and language support for children knowledgeably and responsively based upon observation, assessment, and knowing the children and families they serve. Curriculum is designed to integrate language development with learning about the world, and strategically coordinated as a bridge across languages.

TASKS

- Leadership should ensure that all staff understand the following principles of preschool bilingual pedagogy, and use these indicators as markers of a quality bilingual program:

- a. Daily exposure to both languages is important for young children. This is why there is at least 10% of English each day. Pay particular attention to maintaining a minimum of 50% of the day in the language other than English—it is most vulnerable to being eroded.
 - b. Authentic immersive exposure to and engagement/interaction with adult users of each language is important for language learning. While it can feel challenging sometimes for bilingual adults to maintain the discipline of staying in ONE language at a time, it is important so children are immersed in hearing the authentic rhythm, sounds, structures, and pacing of each language. The expressiveness, richness, and authenticity of the language adults use is a major element in children’s learning of language.
 - c. Language allocation guidelines in preschool are meant to inform the language use of the teachers and staff and are important to maintain in order to ensure adequate and authentic exposure to each language, but young children are free to use all of their linguistic resources (whatever mix of languages) to express themselves. (Note: this is different in K–12 dual language programs where students are expected to follow the structure and discipline of language allocation.) In an emergency or if a child is in great distress, staff should feel free to use whichever language is best understood by the child.
 - d. Content of instruction is not repeated in each language but builds on the learning introduced in the other language. Children transfer what they have learned to the other language, and then learn new vocabulary and concepts in the second language through play and activities that help strengthen the concepts they are developing. After presenting thematic content and supporting learning about a topic in one language, or after reading a book in one language, it is neither necessary nor effective to repeat that same content (or read the book again) in the other language. Simply continue to build on the knowledge base that has already been established.
 - e. Concurrent translation (having someone translate what has just been said in one language into the other language) is not a productive approach to bilingual learning.
- In delivering bilingual/dual language instruction, clear messaging about the transition from one language to another and naming/labeling for children the language being used is important (e.g., “*This morning we are speaking English!*”, “*Now we are switching to Spanish! ¡Buenas tardes, niños!*”). Teachers may wish to use some visual signal when they switch from one language to another (e.g., wear one color apron (or scarf) when in English, a different color when in the Target/Partner language). Color coding of signs by language helps children see that there are two languages.
 - Clear and frequent messaging about bilingualism is important (e.g., explicitly calling out that the class is learning two languages and becoming bilingual and how wonderful it is), and celebrating emerging bilingualism should be built into the curriculum. This might include implementing the California Preschool Biliteracy Pathway Recognition awards at the end of preschool. Learn more about the pathway awards at [CDE Biliteracy Pathway Recognitions](https://www.cde.ca.gov/ps/eng/ps/biliteracy/pathway/recognitions/).
 - Curriculum that is thematically organized, and that integrates language development in and throughout learning about the world, is an important element in effective dual language instruction because the learning scaffolds the development of language, and the topics/themes are a bridge across the two languages.
 - Curriculum materials have to match the Language Allocation model. Ensure parity and alignment in books and materials across the two languages.
 - To support children in developing cross-language awareness, staff should look for opportunities to point out and discuss interesting differences and similarities between the two languages, including cognates when appropriate.
 - Teacher observations and documentation about children’s learning and language development should include assessments of their use of and across both languages.

- Language instruction supports and builds upon children’s receptive language and productive language. The goal is for children to be actively engaged in using language all day long, incorporating new words and using increasingly more complex phrases to communicate their thoughts, opinions, and ideas in both of their languages.

FOCUS AREA D:

BUILDING CAPACITY AND SUPPORTING STAFF

A dual language preschool program is only as strong as the capacity of the staff to implement it. Teachers need to be fluent in the language(s) they are supporting and understand dual language development in young children. A key role of Program Directors is the recruitment and selection of staff with needed language skills, assignment of staff, providing clarity to staff about the dual language model and implications for instruction, and then providing the conditions needed for staff to plan and provide quality dual language instruction and bilingual language support.

TASKS

- Assess teacher and staff language capacities to teach bilingually, and make assignments accordingly. Develop understanding of what teachers and staff need in order to implement the program most effectively—and design a plan to provide support. This may include support (time, stipends) for their own language development and learning.
- Pay attention to matching language skills in assembling teaching/staff teams to a classroom in order to implement the Dual Language/Bilingual program model effectively. (*E.g., a Mostly Target Language Program—90:10 or 80:20—requires a teacher sufficiently proficient in the Target Language and confident in being able to teach all day in the Target Language; a 50:50 program can utilize a monolingual English speaking teacher as a partner with a fully bilingual teacher, bridging across two classrooms in a 50:50 split.*)
- Adopt procedures and protocols and identify resources for teachers to engage in ongoing conversations about bilingualism throughout the year.
- Plan training and professional development for continuous and structured learning about high-quality dual language education that is age and developmentally appropriate, fun, engaging, and based on principles of dual language pedagogy, language-rich instruction, the CA Preschool Foundations and Frameworks. This should include ongoing coaching by coaches with bilingual expertise to enhance teacher practices.
- Recognize that to teach bilingually requires additional planning time to align curriculum and plan activities across the two languages. Structure regular time and collaboration among teaching teams for purposes of dual language curricular planning, and to create a community of learning and support. Depending on when this extra planning has to occur, stipends may be important.
- Work in partnership with other bilingual preschool programs, local school districts with dual language programs, and Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) to build a pipeline for developing more bilingual teachers with expertise in ECE.

FOCUS AREA E:

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIP

Effective dual language/bilingual preschool programs build, support, and draw upon strong partnerships with Multilingual Learner (ML) families and communities that are equally about supporting families, and about partnering in the all-important task of educating and developing thriving, joyful, bicultural, and bilingual learners.

TASKS

- Ensure from initial recruitment and enrollment of children in the program that families are provided information, engaged in dialogue, and understand the advantages of bilingualism and the design of the dual language/bilingual program.
- Encourage and reassure families about the importance of using their home language (their strongest language) with their children, and their crucial role in ensuring the home language is valued and maintained.
- Actively engage families in sharing suggestions and concerns with staff about the language practices of their children (in home language and in English) and the bilingual/dual language development process.
- Families with a child with an identified disability or suspected delay should be reassured that communicating in their home language is beneficial and encouraged.
- Invite and support families to share their culture, traditions, home practices, knowledge and skills, and home languages with the children in the bilingual classrooms.
- Communication between teachers and families should occur in the families' preferred language—including regular classroom updates via texts, video recordings, communication platforms, FaceTime, and newsletters in their home language.
- Families should receive information and resources about the theme, new words, songs and concepts—with suggestions about how to engage their children in conversation about the content and reinforce the learning in the home language.
- Provide information about the longitudinal journey to becoming biliterate and the dual language program and pathway opportunities in local area kindergartens/elementary schools. Families should be provided information about their right to request a dual language program as they begin to explore kindergarten enrollment.