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## Practitioner Briefs

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Some Program Alternatives for English Language Learners

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## Some Program Alternatives for English Language Learners Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence

With the increasing number of linguistically and culturally diverse students in K-12 classrooms, it is imperative that practitioners determine educational approaches that best serve these students. English language learners (ELLs) in particular face the dual challenge of mastering English and acquiring the academic skills and knowledge deemed essential for a sound and productive education. Researchers at CREDE have studied four programs that meet the diverse and complex needs of ELLs: (1) newcomer programs, (2) transitional bilingual education, (3) developmental bilingual education, and (4) two-way immersion. This brief will summarize these programs by highlighting specific features and conditions that will help practitioners determine which programs meet their needs, fulfill their goals, and match their resources.

When starting a new program or assessing the effectiveness of an existing one, it is important to consider common characteristics of all programs. Successful programs maintain ongoing and guided parental involvement and professional development for specialized and mainstream teachers. They promote proficiency in both first and second languages for academic purposes, and they use assessment methods linked to instructional objectives to inform instructional planning and delivery. Effective programs also encompass developmentally appropriate curriculum and high standards for language acquisition and academic achievement, as well as strong leadership among classroom, school, and district personnel. All programs implement sheltered instruction (SI), an approach that integrates language and content instruction. SI serves as a means for making grade-level academic content more accessible to ELLs while at the same time promoting their English language development. Academic subjects are taught using English as the medium of instruction. SI highlights key language features and incorporates special strategies to make the content meaningful and comprehensible to ELLs. In some cases, SI is used as a program option for educating ELLs. When looking at the unique characteristics of the following alternatives, educators should remember that there is no one best program. Rather, these different approaches are all successful if implemented well.

### **Newcomer Programs**

Newcomer programs educate recent immigrant students—who have no or very limited English language proficiency, native literacy skills, or formal education in their native countries—in a special academic environment for a limited period of time. These students' needs surpass the resources of regular ESL or bilingual programs. While such programs exist at the elementary level, CREDE focused on those at the secondary level because the students have less time to meet expectations for English and academic development before high school graduation. Newcomer programs address the pressing need for core academic skills, so that students can advance closer to age-level peers and participate in mainstream classes. They additionally provide a welcoming environment to immigrant students and their families.

All newcomer programs provide distinct, intensive courses in English language development and content instruction through ESL, sheltered instruction, bilingual, or native language literacy designs. They should also have courses that integrate students into American life and orient them to U.S. culture, their new community, and school routines and expectations. Teachers use specialized instructional strategies to address literacy because many students become literate for the first time in English or their first language, although they are beyond the normal age for initial literacy instruction. Guidance counselors assist students with placement and adjustments and connect them and their families with social and health services. It is most helpful to have bilingual staff who are familiar with students' cultures.

Newcomer programs vary widely depending on their educational goals, site options, available staff, and resources. For example, programs may be located in a school or at a separate site, and the daily program may be one period, half day, full day, or after-school. Programs may serve one or more grade levels. Students may be enrolled from one to three semesters and may be organized by English proficiency instead of grade level. Further, a newcomer program is a viable option only with the proper transition procedures in place. Since the aim of newcomer programs is to prepare recent immigrant students for success in regular ESL, bilingual, or mainstream programs, the transition is critical, especially if students switch schools. Teachers and guidance counselors must help students plan their course schedules and oversee the transition process.

### **Transitional Bilingual Education**

Transitional bilingual education (TBE) provides initial instruction in literacy and academic content in ELLs' native language, along with instruction in English oral language development. With the goal of English proficiency, the language in which academic subjects are taught gradually shifts from students' first language to English. Typically, instruction in the first language begins in kindergarten or first grade, basic English begins in second grade, and students are transitioned to all English instruction by third grade. However, many schools have similar 2- or 3-year programs for students who enter in upper grades.

TBE is intended to ensure the mastery of grade-level academic skills and knowledge and accelerate the process of learning English. Instruction through the native language in the early grades supports the acquisition of English because it helps ELLs progress in academic subjects at the same pace as native English speakers, provides them with knowledge and experience to facilitate learning English, eases the acquisition of reading and writing skills that can be transferred to English, and allows parents to support and communicate with their children.

Effective first language instruction and oral English language development determine successful transition in TBE. If early grade-level skills and concepts are not mastered in the first language and oral English skills are not available, then the transition to academic English is jeopardized. Because success in the later grades depends on success in prior grades, students need additional

support if they are having difficulty in the early grades. Transition from instruction in the first language to English should be gradual, phasing in subjects one at a time. As early as possible, students should interact socially with native English speakers and learn along with them. TBE teachers should be certified in bilingual education for strong native language development, and mainstream teachers should be trained in sheltered instruction, so that students receive adequate and effective instruction when they make the transition to all-English classes. TBE programs require a sizeable number of ELLs who speak the same language to optimize first language instruction.

### **Developmental Bilingual Education**

Developmental bilingual education (DBE) is an enrichment program that educates ELLs using both English and their first language for academic instruction, promoting full proficiency in all aspects of the two languages. Typically, academic instruction in the first language, along with oral English language development, begins in kindergarten or first grade. One grade is added each year, and subjects are taught in English and the first language for as many grades as possible throughout the elementary level. Learners receive meaningful content in English, while continuing challenging work in their first language. DBE is thus an additive approach, in which the first language is not lost, so students have uninterrupted cognitive development and accelerated academic achievement. Additionally, DBE programs provide socioculturally supportive classrooms, building on the home knowledge of students and encouraging cultural and linguistic respect.

Significant features of DBE programs include the separation of languages, the equal status of both languages, and the integration of students with different language proficiency levels. Mixing and translating languages should be avoided to maximize the development of academic proficiency in each language, but code-switching is acceptable during social times. Each language should be incorporated into the school through symbols, announcements, and services. Students should learn subjects together regardless of their level of proficiency in each language because they can learn from each other and serve as peer tutors. Staff should be proficient in both languages academically, and thus be certified in content areas and bilingual education. A feasible DBE program necessitates a sufficient number of students with the same first language for at least one class at any given grade level. It is important to ascertain whether there will be a sufficient number of students in the later years for one class to maintain the program. The language minority community must also have an interest in maintaining their first language and support the goal of high academic achievement in both languages.

### **Two-Way Immersion**

Two-way immersion (TWI) provides integrated language and academic instruction for native English speakers and native speakers of another language with the goals of high academic achievement, first and second language proficiency, and cross-cultural understanding. TWI programs provide content and literacy instruction in both languages, integrate language minority and language majority students for at least 50% of the day, and have a roughly equal balance of language minority and language majority students. ELLs attain high academic achievement and English language proficiency because they are taught in both languages, with skills and knowledge acquired in the first language paving the way for acquisition in English. For native English speakers, TWI enables them to develop advanced levels of second language proficiency without compromising their academic achievement or English language development. Because language minority and language majority students learn together and must communicate in both languages, TWI provides meaningful social interaction that promotes dual language learning.

Major features of TWI programs are the separation of languages, the integration of students of both language groups, and the equal status of both languages. Extended time in one language encourages native English speakers and ELLs to communicate in the language of instruction. All TWI programs require fully bilingual instructional staff and teaching materials to ensure proficiency and biliteracy. The population required is a significant number of both native English and language minority speakers of the same language. Transient populations are not ideal because long-term participation is most beneficial. Both groups of speakers must have an interest in bilingualism. There must be full district support exhibiting balanced services in the minority language, so that the TWI program is equally valued with other programs.

### **Making Choices**

When choosing among available alternatives, practitioners must first decide whether there is a goal to promote bilingual proficiency in addition to promoting ELLs' academic development. When bilingual proficiency is a goal, developmental bilingual education, two-way immersion, and newcomer programs with bilingual transition are appropriate choices. The next critical decision concerns the student population to be served. Two-way immersion is a viable option only if there are groups of both ELLs and native English speakers interested in bilingualism. Developmental and newcomer programs serve only ELLs, with newcomer programs serving ELLs with limited literacy and schooling.

If the goal does not include promoting bilingual proficiency, then transitional bilingual education and newcomer programs with English transition are possibilities. Transitional bilingual and newcomer programs are short-term in nature. Both must ensure appropriate follow-up so that teachers are prepared to help ELLs achieve at the same level as native English speakers. Sheltered instruction should be used in all of the programs discussed to ensure that ELLs comprehend academic instruction when it is delivered in English, especially when it is first introduced. All program alternatives should be harmonized with the mainstream program to maximize their effectiveness. And while these programs are discussed as separate options, a district can implement more than one in order to better meet the diverse needs of its student population.

Schools in the U.S. must consider how to educate linguistically and culturally diverse students in the best possible way. Newcomer programs, transitional bilingual education, developmental bilingual education, and two-way immersion are alternatives that work. Choosing and implementing effective education for ELLs requires an understanding of the available alternatives and a careful consideration of a district's goals and resources, and the needs and characteristics of its students.

This brief is based on CREDE Educational Practice Report 1, *Program Alternatives for Linguistically Diverse Students*, edited by Fred Genesee. To view this report and other resources on the programs discussed, visit [www.cal.org/crede/pubs/](http://www.cal.org/crede/pubs/). For more information, contact CREDE Dissemination at [crede@cal.org](mailto:crede@cal.org), (202) 362-0700, ext. 247, 4646 40<sup>th</sup> Street NW, Washington, DC 20016.