

Descubriendo la Lectura: An Effective Support for Bilingual Education

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Imagine a first-grade teacher entering a school district where close to half of the student population is comprised of English language learners (ELL). What support might she expect to receive in order to ensure student success not only for ELL students but for all students? The belief system of Ysleta Independent School District (YISD) translates into the district's vision statement:

“All students who enroll in our schools will graduate from high school, *fluent in two or more languages*, prepared and inspired to continue their education in a four year college, university or institution

of higher education so that they become successful citizens in their community.”

The statement conveys the district's moral obligation to prepare all students at high levels so that they may overcome the challenges of tomorrow's world. When students encounter difficulties with learning to read and write, YISD steps in and provides effective and appropriate safety nets for all students. In harmony with the phrase “it takes a village,” collaboration is essential to student success. This article will illustrate the manner in which Descubriendo la Lectura (DLL) supports bilingual education in YISD to afford students a triumphant future.

A fast-growing urban city in southwest Texas, El Paso is home to the YISD, one of the largest school districts in Texas. Bordering Juárez, Mexico, to the south and the state of New Mexico to the northwest, it is the sixth largest city in Texas and the 23rd largest in the United States. The city of Juárez is the fifth largest in Mexico and the El Paso-Juárez area is the largest bi-national community in the world. El Paso County's population stands at 679,622 while Juarez's population is almost double that at 1,217,818. Seventy-eight percent of the population in the sister cities is Hispanic. This proximity to the border generates a large influx of students from other countries who attend U.S. schools.



Laura Anguiano, a Descubriendo la Lectura teacher at East Point Elementary in El Paso, Texas, works with Moises Cabral, Jr.

The Role of Descubriendo la Lectura in a Comprehensive Approach to Bilingual Education

First-grade student enrollment in YISD is approximately 3,500, of which 1,200 (33%) are ELL students. DLL was selected as an early intervention for first-grade students as it has proven to be highly effective. DLL, a reconstruction of Reading Recovery, is not a translation of Reading Recovery. Based on the same theoretical framework as Reading Recovery, it addresses the distinct functional and linguistic differences between the English and Spanish languages. The specialized training given to DLL teachers

assures an effective literacy support to first-grade Spanish speaking students identified as at risk of failure to learn how to read and write (Texas Woman's University, 2004). By providing an early intervention in a student's native language, the district recognizes that literacy success in the native language has an effect on the level of success in English literacy in subsequent years.

Academic development in the first language has an extremely important and positive effect on second language learning. Second language acquisition is not linear in process. It requires 2–5 years to achieve Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and 7–10 years to acquire Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Collier, 1995).

To educate bilingual students at high levels, YISD offers three types of bilingual programs: (a) late exit transitional model, where students are taught content in their native language (Spanish) while they acquire the English language¹; (b) two-way dual language immersion, a voluntary program that invites English and Spanish speakers to be instructed together using a target language (Spanish); and, (c) one-way immersion, a voluntary program similar to two-way dual language immersion but has only one language group in the classroom. (See Table 1.)

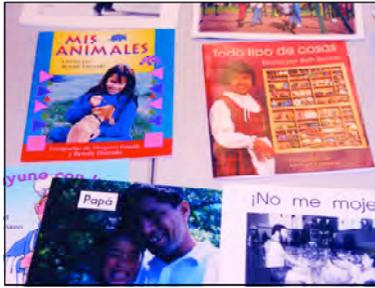
Research studies by Thomas and Collier (2000) indicate that the two-way immersion (90–10 model) and one-way immersion programs have been instrumental in closing the gap between ELL and monolingual English students.

Dr. Marie Clay, developer of Reading Recovery, emphasizes the importance of language and underscores that rich language development is the best preparation for literacy learning. Her research proves that “the least complicated entry into literacy learning is to begin to read and write the language that children already know and speak” (Clay, 1993, as cited in Escamilla, Andrade, Basurto, Ruiz, & Clay, 1996). Since reading involves messages expressed in language, the individualized one-to-one lessons in DLL provide the student suitable opportunities to develop his oral language as he acquires effective strategies that will help him become a successful reader and writer. For example, by means of conversations between the teacher and student about a book he will read, the student not only checks his understanding of the story, but also develops, expands,

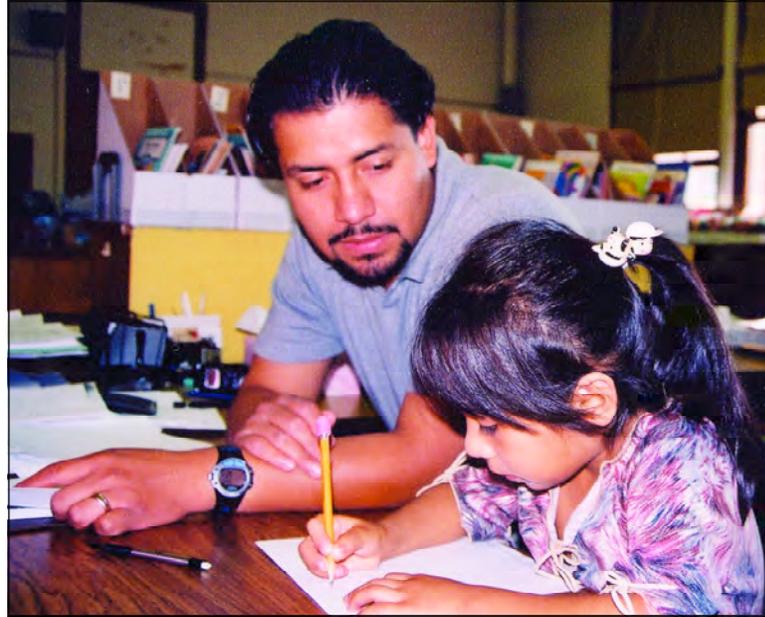
Table 1. Three Types of Bilingual Programs Offered In Ysleta ISD

	Late Exit Transitional Program	Two-Way Dual Language Immersion Program	One-Way Immersion Program
Goal	English acquisition	Bilingual/biliterate/bicultural	Bilingual/biliterate/bicultural
English Program	Academics through a second language	English language development	English language development
Participation	State and federally mandated	Voluntary	Voluntary
Population	English language learners	English language learners, monolingual English students, bilingual students	English language learner
Entry Criteria	Any time during the year	Kindergarten or first grade for English dominant, any time during the year for ELLs	Any time during the year
Program Duration	K–6	K–12	K–12
Curriculum	TAKS based	TAKS based	TAKS based
Instructional Delivery	Monolingual	Monolingual	Monolingual
Language of Instruction	Spanish and English	Spanish and English	Spanish and English
Consent	Parental agreement required	Parental agreement required	Parental agreement required

¹Ysleta employs the 90–10 model in which instruction at kindergarten and first grade is delivered 90% of the time in Spanish and 10% of the time in English; second grade, the ratio is 80–20; third grade, 70–30; fourth grade, 60–40; fifth grade to high school, 50–50.



Academic development in a native language has an extremely important and positive effect on second language learning. Leveled books in Spanish, like those above, and instruction in a familiar language help DLL students build a solid foundation and become effective readers and writers in Spanish, and eventually in English as well.



and refines his language. This is an essential area of learning that facilitates subsequent literacy learning and success (Clay, 1993). For children at risk of failure in reading and writing, this view becomes critical as one looks for early interventions that will provide opportunities for success. DLL offers that opportunity. The case studies of Kevin and Bryan exemplify the impact of DLL on the success of bilingual students.

Kevin and Bryan: Success Stories

As a recent immigrant from Mexico in a YISD first-grade classroom, Kevin received literacy instruction in Spanish. His scores on the *Instrumento de observación de los logros de la lecto-escritura inicial* (Escamilla, et al., 1996) reading and writing assessment were the lowest in his classroom. He was able to write one

word, his name; identify 11 letter forms of 61 letter forms in the Spanish alphabet; did not identify any of the 20 words on the word test, and read at Text Level 0. After successful completion of his series of DLL lessons, Kevin was able to read at Text Level 14. By the end of the school year he was reading at Text Level 20. In third grade, Kevin successfully passed the reading portion of the state mandated test, Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). Texas mandates high stakes testing beginning at third grade, and all students must pass the third-grade reading test in order to be promoted to the next grade. Kevin's success typifies the long-term benefits of an effective early intervention.

Bryan, also a new immigrant from Mexico, enrolled in first grade during the 2003–04 school year and received literacy instruction in Spanish. At the

beginning of the year, he was identified as at risk of failing to learn to read and write. His initial scores on the Instrumento de Observación placed him as one of the lowest-performing students in his class. Although Bryan identified letters of the Spanish alphabet, wrote 18 words and read 14 words on a word list, he was unable to apply his knowledge to the task of reading and writing in context; he was reading at Text Level 1. In his 15 weeks of DLL lessons, Bryan accelerated 13 text levels to Text Level 14 (equivalent to first grade) and was able to compete with the average-performing students in his class. Strategically, by the end of the year he had soared to the top of his class, reading at Text Level 30. As a result of becoming a confident reader and writer, he not only won first place in the district's creative writing contest, but also won first place in the science fair at his school.

Figure 1. Progress on Text Reading Level of First-Round YISD Students Served By DLL Who Successfully Completed Their Series of Lessons

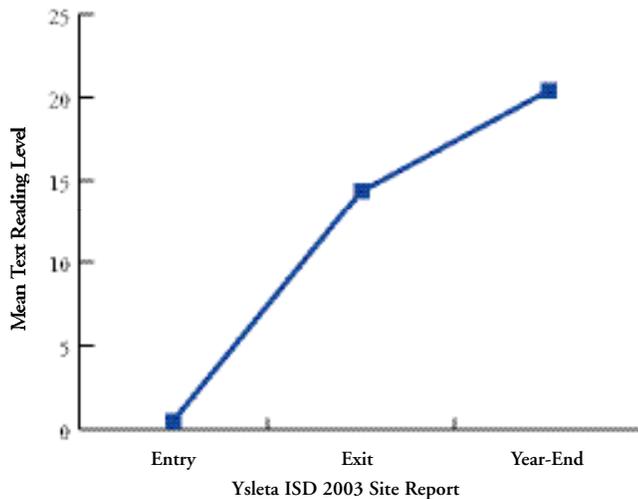
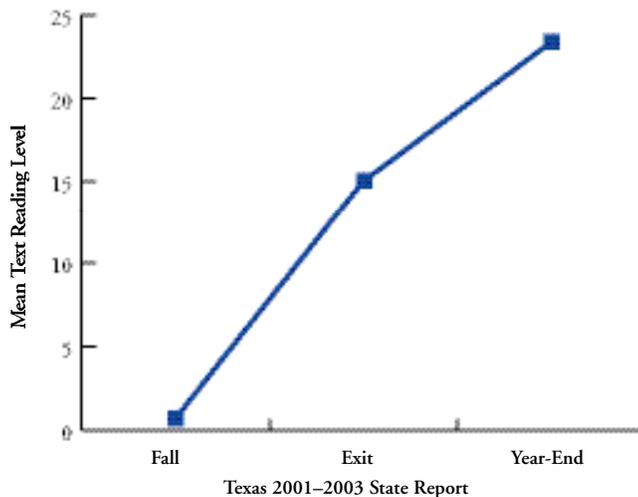


Figure 2. Progress on Text Reading Level of All First-Round Texas Students Served by DLL Who Successfully Completed Their Series of Lessons



Kevin's and Bryan's success validates how an early intervention in the student's language of instruction can yield long-term benefits and impact performance on the state assessments as well as heighten student confidence. Where Kevin and Bryan would be today without the benefit of DLL intervention is hard to predict. Perhaps they would be in need of ongoing special education support for years to come, as are many students who 'fall through the cracks.' Students without an adequate safety net such as Reading Recovery/DLL cost the system an inordinate amount of dollars (Dyer & Binkney, 1995). Auspiciously, Kevin's and Bryan's are not isolated success stories. YISD's end-of-year results for DLL are comparable to the state results. Both show that most students who complete their series of lessons are reading above grade level. (See Figures 1 and 2.)

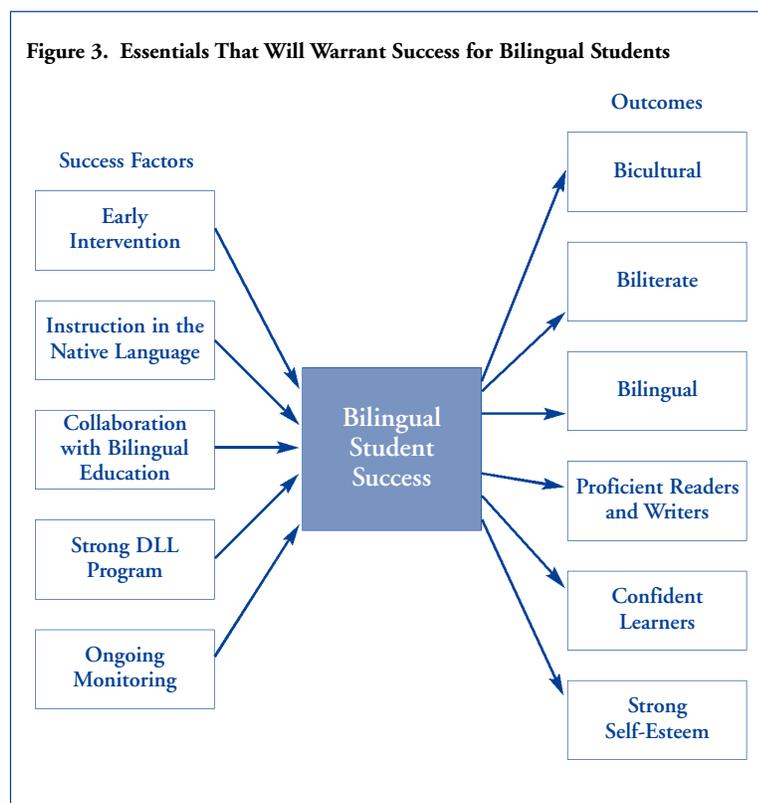
Not surprisingly, the collaboration between the bilingual and early education departments has been critical to the success of DLL in YISD. Bilingual education-certified teachers and teacher leaders maintain a solid foundation in second language acquisition. DLL teachers and teacher leaders are passionate child advocates, provide strong language models for the students, and serve as exceptional resources for classroom teachers in literacy acquisition. Currently, 32 of the 36 campuses in the district offer early intervention opportunities through Reading Recovery/DLL. It is the first intervention before a referral to special education. Many Reading

Recovery/DLL teachers serve as literacy coaches at their school sites and provide a year-long literacy course onsite through New Mexico State University. In turn, the bilingual department provides funding for various professional development opportunities such as conferences and workshops for DLL teachers, as well as awareness sessions for both Reading Recovery and DLL teachers on second language acquisition.

One primary goal of Reading Recovery/DLL is to dramatically decrease the number of learners who have severe difficulty with literacy learning which result in exorbitant long-term cost to the educational system (Askew, Fountas, Lyons, Pinnell, & Schmitt, 1998). It costs approximately \$1,651 per year to serve a YISD student with a reading disability in special education, which is comparable to the national average—and most students remain in special education for multiple years. Additionally, it costs approximately \$5,208 per student per year for retention, which is also comparable to the national average (Dyer & Binkney, 1995). Since the inception of DLL in 1994–95 in the district, the retention rate has dropped from 5% to 2.4%. Special education referrals have plunged dramatically. For example, in the school year 2002–03 alone, there was a 43.7% decrease in referrals.

Figure 3 helps to depict the essentials that figure into success for bilingual students.

No one will argue about the fundamental idea that it is every school district's moral obligation to prepare all students at high levels. The success of ELL students is driven by the belief system that “it takes a village to



raise a child.” In YISD, the bilingual and early education departments epitomize the collaborative effort that is crucial to the success of bilingual teachers and students. Together, these departments equip all individuals with materials, high quality teacher training, and early intervention (DLL), as well as extracurricular opportunities that will promise a successful future for at-risk learners. Being fluent in two or more languages will open the door of opportunity for all students. Descubriendo la Lectura affords students the opportunity to succeed in the world of tomorrow.

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