

# *“Bilingual Acquisition – Language Learning Tips”*

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*An Essay on Bilingualism for both Public  
School Children and Adults –  
comparing, vetting, and providing learning  
improvements to heighten outcomes*

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## Executive Summary

Few people, if any, would deny that acquiring a second or third non-native language is an invaluable skill set in today's world of international travel, personal interactions, and commercial activities. There are many reasons for learning a new language at any age. Of course, acquiring a non-native language is easiest when one is young, but there are a slew of adults that graduated high school or university years ago that still possess a longing to study and learn an additional non-native tongue with its cultural dynamics.

The purpose of this document has three primary aims. First, it is intended to politely offer assistance to an adult desiring to learn a second or third foreign language. It offers advice, resources and pragmatic tips to help the learner become more proficient and efficient at the language acquisitional process. Second, the essay compares many similarities and differences of fundamental language learning and development in comparison to a young elementary student and an adult. In fact, both learners are from a rudimentary perspective in the same 'knowledge' or content situation when they begin a structured learning plan. Lastly, it evaluates and offers corrective recommendations to the 'not so successful' elements of public school elementary bilingual program models such as early exit, late exit or dual language variants.

The overall success of any human task almost always can be reduced to the following three basic elements regardless of the age of the learner: *effort*, *consistency* and *repeated practice*. Additionally, the learning outcomes are also highly dependent upon the program itself. If the structure of the program and its associated pedagogy is poorly designed for either a young student or an adult, performance is adversely affected. Thus, an adult learner must be selective in the various program options that are available. For instance, they may enroll in a traditional brick-and-mortar university or community college coursework, or select independent self-directed study via internet apps. Today, the resources are available in almost any given avenue the adult can choose, and again, fit their erudition wants. Children enrolled in the public schools (traditional or charter) do not choose. They are subjected to a program selected by educators that all too often do not possess program evaluation on its overall effectiveness either at the onset or via formative and summative assessments. In general, public school curricular programming in all content areas is frequently implemented without a thorough understanding of 'what' and 'when' is to be accomplished. Consequently, the essay examines public school bilingual programming benefits and known performance issues with associated corrective recommendations to improve better student outcomes in American Title 1 elementary schools.

Skill sets learned at university in mathematics, computer science and science – for example – frequently demand higher paying jobs and lucrative career paths. So, does the ability to fluently communicate in languages beyond one's native tongue. Regardless of the curriculum content in schools or personal adult learning, it is paramount that the program be effective. It must produce expected, heightened and equitable results regardless of the learner's socioeconomic status. If the program does not, the curricular program design must be objectively analyzed and rectified for efficiency, formative and summative intentions. The rationale for continuing an ineffective curricular program or one that cannot be viably adjusted should not be based on secondary goals. Specifically, curricular programs that do not produce heightened student outcomes should not continue based on cultural arguments, social justice attributes, or worse yet, bureaucratic employment ramifications for a select few educators, when the academic and economic outcomes are detrimental to the program's participants.



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## About the Author

Blaine Helwig is a locally, state and nationally recognized campus administrator and was the J. Walter Graham Elementary Principal in Austin ISD for 9 years. In that time period, J. Walter Graham Elementary (an urban Title 1 school) experienced dramatic and sustained academic success with typical inner city challenging student demographics. From 2009 to 2016, Graham Elementary School's academic performance earned exemplary accountability ratings and every possible academic distinction by the Texas Education Agency. The school was honored as a 2012 National Blue Ribbon School recipient, and the campus was featured as a National Blue Ribbon Profile School for academic excellence on the United States Department of Education's website - one of only four schools in the country to receive this prestigious honor. The Graham campus has also been recognized annually by Education Non-Profit Organizations for high and sustained academic performance. Finally, the language arts, mathematics and science stop-gap resources implemented at Graham that produced heightened student success are currently used in many other Title 1 campuses and districts with similar high percentages of English Language Learners, minority and low socioeconomic student populations.



After completing a Bachelor of Science degree in Architectural Engineering from the University of Texas at Austin in 1985, he began his professional career as a lead structural engineer designing over 100 state and federal highway bridges in Texas. He also worked as a senior project engineer for the Department of Defense with technical engineering management and oversight on the Parrotts Ferry signature bridge retrofit in California as well as environmental site mitigation at Little Dell Dam in Utah and a hydraulic conduit drainage redesign at Lake Sonoma Dam in California. At present, Mr. Helwig retains his license as a registered professional engineer in Texas with a structural engineering specialization.

In 1992, Mr. Helwig was conferred a Bachelor of Business Administration in Accounting. During this period of business study at the University of Texas, he pursued additional and focused coursework in both economics and finance. Mr. Helwig is extremely appreciative of the financial support from the US military throughout his years of university education and is a proud veteran of both the United States Air Force and Army.

After working as an accounting director for a large library system in central Texas, he was alternatively certified to work as an elementary teacher by the University of Texas. He taught fourth and fifth grade self-contained classrooms in the Round Rock Independent School District for six years. It was during those professional years that extensive language arts, science, social studies and mathematics curriculum were developed. The initial design work on the numeracy and literacy stop-gap resources was completed, implemented and beta-tested in intermediate classrooms. Those stop-gap intervention programs significantly evolved during his Title 1 school experience and are currently used by tens of thousands of elementary students in both traditional public schools as well as charter schools across the State of Texas.

In 2004, he was awarded a Master's degree in Educational Administration from Texas State University and worked for two years as the assistant principal at Charlotte Cox Elementary in the Leander Independent School District, a suburban school district near Austin. He began work in the Austin Independent School District in 2006 as an Elementary Program Supervisor under the direction of the Associate Superintendent's Office. A year later, he started his principal assignment at J. Walter Graham Elementary and maintained that capacity until his retirement in the fall of 2016. In 2012, Mr. Helwig was recognized by the United States Department of Education as one of seven recipients in the country with the prestigious Terrel H. Bell award for school transformation for producing outstanding student achievement for all students regardless of race, language proficiency and socioeconomic status. He was also the 2012 recipient of the Central Texas HEB Principal Excellence in Education Award and a five-time nominee and a two-time finalist for Austin ISD Principal of the Year. Currently, Blaine Helwig is a curriculum writer and a Title 1 education consultant in rural and urban school transformation. He is a cofounder of Celestial Numeracy, a daily numeracy program that presently serves over 80,000 elementary and middle students each day as well as a cofounder of The New 3Rs Education Consulting.





Alternatively, I harbored other reasons for learning German. For one, it is my ancestral tongue, and I had heard that nonnative language spoken more than any other when I was a child. Also, the English language originated from Indo-European German dialects, and as a matter of fact, 800 of the most common 1,000 words in the English language are Germanic based. Thus, I wanted to analyze first-hand the grammaticalization and the word spellings of modern-day German in comparison with their contemporary counterparts in English. In comparison to Spanish, German was much easier for me to learn since the grammatical structure of German emulates my native tongue – English. Additionally, as pointed out, so many common English words are extremely close in spelling and meaning as their German cognates.

Finally, it is important to recognize that learning a new language is a *deferred gratification* process. It is similar to dieting, exercise, attending university, learning to play a musical instrument and other interests many of us have tried unsuccessfully through the years. It takes time, consistency and commitment in order to demonstrate marked results. However, it is my hope that the linguistic and pragmatic information in this blog assist other likeminded adults in their linguistic pursuits of acquiring a non-native language.

### **Adult Non-Native Language Learning – Independent Study Digital Resources**

When I attended high school and university, there was not yet a foreign language requirement for graduation. As mentioned earlier, I had acquired a small bit of German, French and Spanish from international travels over the last 4 decades, but those language skill sets were almost exclusively contextual and commercial in nature – train stations, airports, restaurants, grocery stores and the like. In those conversational settings, my foreign counterpart was fully expecting the commercially related questions I would ask, and I was fully prepared to respond to his or her queries for the same reason. However, the second the conversation moved beyond contextual commercial exchanges, I was unable to converse efficiently or effectively without labored effort and pantomimic arm motions.



In my present-day Spanish and German language studies, I desired a much broader subject and conversational breadth of sentence structure, grammar and vocabulary. However, I had a few initial requirements that I believed would enhance my probability of success. I needed a structured program, or learning was likely to unravel into a haphazard attempt to logically sequence vocabulary and grammar skills. I also did not want to invest a lot of money, and I desired daily flexibility to set my own learning schedule as well as program pacing. Finally, the digital app must support smart cellphone mobility because of my lifestyle, so I could access the program anywhere an internet signal could be located. Although there were several quality and viable on-line language programs I researched, I selected *Duolingo*. It fit my erudition needs nicely.

### **Comparing Non-Native Language Acquisition: Young Students and Adults**

Mastering a non-native language is without a doubt more easily accomplished when a person is young; however, there is much that can be garnered in comparing the similarities and differences between adult and elementary school-aged language acquisition. Several benefits in acquiring a second language at a young age are as follows: reduction of accent pronunciations due to the plasticity of the vocal cords, insight and appreciation into a culture other than one's own, heightened exposure of word etymologies and commercial use of that mastered skill set in and after high school or university.

A major reason that a language is learned easier as a child than as an adult is the **pace or speed** of language acquisition. The vocabulary and sentence structure learning expectations of an elementary student are



remarkably different than that of an adult. A child slowly acquires language over many years beginning with the embryonic elements, but that is not true for an adult acquiring a second or third language. As expected, an adult's learning rate must progress at a highly accelerated rate in comparison to that of an elementary student. For instance, the scope and breadth in grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure a typical adult learner acquires in 6 months to one year is roughly the same as that of a child's first 5 to 6 years of public schooling.

It is also important to note that **if** an elementary child's parents do not speak the targeted language taught at their child's school, they cannot support the child's academic language needs at home – which is very common in urban and rural American Title 1 public schools. Pragmatically, in those situations, the only **structured exposure** a young elementary student learns of the targeted, non-native language (i.e., English) is during school hours. Also, English is not an easy language to learn with its 1,400-year history of multiple linguistic influences that uniquely affect its word spellings, uses and pronunciations. Consequently, if the public school's bilingual academic programming focuses heavily on the student's native language (i.e., parent's language) and not the targeted language (e.g., English in the United States), then the majority of students do not learn the phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency and other critical foundational elements of the targeted language in the elementary primary grades. As expected, a vast majority of bilingually emergent students frequently struggle academically with both languages in the elementary intermediate (i.e., 3<sup>rd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup>) grades. In comparison, this is not an issue for an adult learning a non-native language. Of course, adults have mastered their native tongue in all aspects of the language.

However, young students often have an advantage of constant, daily interaction with other students on their instructional level fomenting unscripted practice sessions. Assuming an adult language learner is not enrolled at a brick-and-mortar university with access to students in their linguistic plight, it is extremely beneficial to have access to a spouse, partner or friend who is fluent in the targeted language – for the same reason a child's parents' **academic** native tongue prowess is essential.



A unique learning situation that is not as sensitive to an adult learner, but does have a dramatic impact upon student learning, is **if and when** a student is classified as 'talented and gifted.' Children attending Title 1 elementary schools that have been **formally assessed and qualify** as ELA talented and gifted possess an expected and clear advantage in learning multiple languages. These students have repeatedly demonstrated the capability to learn TWO academic languages in a 120-minute ELA block that was only designed for ONE targeted language (i.e., English in the United States) due to heightened cognitive processing ability.

However, it has been my professional Title 1 experience as well as my colleagues that splitting the 120-minute language block has not been effective for the mass of general education bilingual emergent, LEP or ELL students. Those students daily 120-minute language arts block now focuses on learning NOT one new academic language but TWO academic languages simultaneously. Thus, regardless if the bilingual program is a late-exit or a dual language variant and if a student's home/native language is Russian, Spanish, etc., the student is expected to completely master their native tongue by sixth (6<sup>th</sup>) grade as well as the targeted (English) language within a normal 120-minute ELA allotted time each day. Splitting a standard 120-minute language

arts block for two languages in low-income schools without home language support is a common-sense failure issue in basic learning principles – less engagement, less learning, less mastery! It is for these academic performance reasons that the vast majority of charter public schools opt for an early exit bilingual program and focus only the targeted language (i.e., English) in their ELA program design.

### *Elementary Student Exceptions – Bilingual Programming in non-Title 1 Elementary Schools*



Elementary students attending non-Title 1 schools are usually much more successful in dual language bilingual programs than their less affluent peers attending Title 1 schools. There are logical reasons for this general phenomenon. These middle- and high-income students hail from homes with financial support and highly educated parents. They also do not enroll in prekindergarten or kindergarten with a language word gap as the vast majority of economically disadvantaged students. Furthermore, middle and high income parents’ academic language support in English is a major benefit to their children as is their financial resources for books, experiences

and heightened language development at home. Finally, if a bilingually emergent or ELL is enrolled in a non-Title 1 elementary school and their parents are well educated and speak both academic languages proficiently, then that student group also possesses home and school support levels to excel in dual language programs.

### *Heightening Student Outcomes and Vetting Bilingual Programming in American Title 1 Schools*

Decades of Title 1 National literacy data clearly indicate the lack of success in achieving literacy proficiency by a majority of elementary students. Pre-pandemic COVID released student literacy data indicates that only 35% of this country’s 4<sup>th</sup> grade students are reading on or above grade level. For the informed Title 1 educator, there is also little doubt of the lackluster performance in the past and current bilingual education programming for emergent bilingual/LEP students enrolled in Title 1 public schools. The depressed elementary school outcomes in one or both learned languages much more negatively affect emergent bilingual, LEP and ELL/EL students as they transition to middle and high school. Despite the empirical evidence, Title 1 bilingual programming should not be eliminated and abandoned without possible adjustments to make the programming more effective.



There are two solutions that may dramatically increase the performance of bilingual education programming in urban Title 1 schools for emergent bilingual/LEP students. In order to possess mastery of two languages – both the native tongue and the targeted one, the standard 120-minute ELA block in Title 1 elementary schools must be significantly increased to a recommended minimum of 215 to 230 minutes to accommodate both languages. The additional ELA instructional time could be augmented or subtracted based on one of two choices. Either increase the length of the school day to accommodate the additional ELA time, or alternatively, reduce other academic content areas (e.g., science or social studies). It is the author’s opinion, that the school day should be extended and not supplant another core area. Finally, in lieu of similarly extending the middle school instructional day, each junior high student could be required to a double blocked language schedule – for instance, English and Spanish ELA blocked periods. An extended elementary school day could impact the after-school bus schedules; thus, elementary school could begin their instructional day.

Consequently, as a matter of general importance in any curriculum of any core content area that is implemented in the public elementary schools, it is paramount to objectively assess if the programming is working as

designed and producing academic outcomes. Bilingual programming is not an exception. Thus, a school district should implement a vetted comparison between the learner's language proficiency in both languages (i.e., native and targeted languages) in the intermediate (3<sup>rd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup>) grades. For example, if a third-grade dual language or late-exit student/participant takes the Spanish State assessment in the spring, then two weeks later, that student should be assessed with a vetted English assessment – or vice versa. In doing so, student data could be tracked each school year for each child that would clearly evaluate the effectiveness of the bilingual programming through 5<sup>th</sup> grade in both languages.

This is an important language comparison since it is common practice in the intermediate grades that many Title 1 elementary school ELA educators assess their student in their strongest language, and for emergent bilingual students, that language is invariably their native tongue. Thus, in the spring semester, intermediate teachers spend significantly more instructional time on the students' native language development and not on the targeted language (i.e., English). Consequently, the targeted language proficiency levels are for all practical purposes *publicly* 'avoided' on official State assessments in elementary school, bilingually emergent, low-income students lack of proficiency in the targeted language – English in the United States – is masked until the middle school State assessment years.



In American middle and high school, students usually are only eligible to sit for the English ELA State assessment in the spring; however, their single language assessment would provide invaluable comparative data at those grade levels. The secondary school's State assessment would either prove or not prove if children classified as general education bilingual emergent/LEP actually linguistically 'catch-up' in the targeted language as various educational 'research' has indicated for decades. Then, if not, modifications and adjustments could be discussed at the elementary level to ensure that existing bilingual programming is effective long-term. Targeted language mastery (i.e., English in the United States) must be grade level proficient prior to entering and exiting high school. If not, a majority of emergent bilingual/LEP students will not be adequately prepared for university level work and high-income professional career opportunities, and their only other option is relatively low-wage service industry level jobs.

Moreover, when a student is significantly behind academically by the end of fifth grade, it has been my professional experience that they do not readily 'catch-up' in their middle and high school years despite claims by bilingual 'research' conducted almost three (3) decades ago. An excursion to any Title 1 middle and high school vertical team feeder of the elementary school would clearly verify this fact. In 2012, Mitt Romney stated in a public presidential Republican debate that when he was the Massachusetts Governor, his State's Legislature discontinued bilingual education since so many of their 'emergent bilingual/LEP' secondary students were not proficient in English. It was at that moment that I realized the poor student outcomes in my school district and other large Texas school districts were not an exception.

### **Pragmatic Adult Learning Tips for Bilingual or Trilingual Acquisition**

Even if the learner is enrolled in a college or brick and mortar language course, it is highly likely that they will subscribe to Mango, Duolingo, Rosetta Stone, or other on-line digital based programs. These online programs are a double-edged sword of benefits and detriments depending on the learners needs. In using Duolingo, a few recommendations are listed below that I found very helpful in my learning process.

- ❖ Language selection will determine the level of linguistic difficulty. If the learner is an English speaker, languages like Mandarin or Arabic will be much more difficult and require more study time to achieve



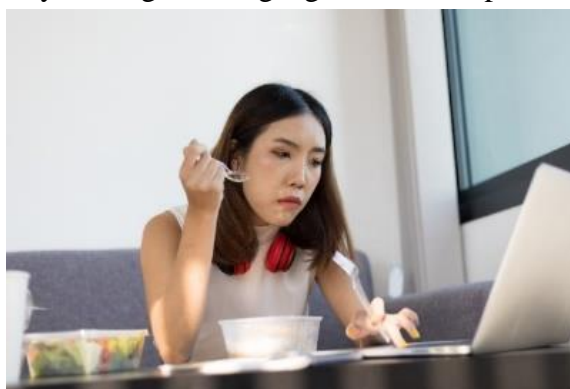
the same results in comparison to learning Indo-European languages like Italian, Spanish, Dutch and German.

- ❖ On your phone or computer, set the language in settings for your selected language. TURN OFF auto-correct on your phone, or learning to correctly spell new words will be difficult. Spell them out on your phone each time until you have memorized the correct spelling of the word or phrase.
- ❖ Slow down, do not overdo it in the beginning weeks – do a reasonable amount of practice each day. For instance, using *Duolingo*, my goal is between 50 and 100 XP (i.e., extra practice) points per day in each Spanish and German. I notice some of my Duolingo co-learners' XP point totals that are beginning the program. They are completing a 600 XP points or much, much more per day. It will be difficult for anyone to remember that many new vocabulary words, sentence structure and endemic usages in any new language. Be consistent and reasonable in your approach – long-term gains from consistent short-term work.
- ❖ Keep a notebook. Write out the new vocabulary words, phrases or sentences, and its English (i.e., native language) word/phrase equivalent. *Practice spelling the words you miss correctly until they are memorized.* **Note:** Writing with a paper-pencil process invokes a psychometric long-term memory response in comparison with only a visual learning or finger typing on phone/computer. Review your words and phrases during quiet times or when a consistent time avails itself. Practice as an elementary child would learning a new language by writing words and phrases that are new or missed during lessons. Physically writing the language is key to ingrain correct spelling of words and instilling the grammar content in long-term memory. It is also recommended reviewing the day's lesson immediately prior to bedtime. The human brain appears to process all night long on those last language elements before we drift off to sleep. Using this method, I have discovered that I remember the words, phrases and sentences I practiced at bedtime when I awake the next morning.
- ❖ If a person desires to learn two (2) non-native languages simultaneously, begin only one language. After about 4 to 6 months, begin the other language after the first selected language has a sound foundation. This methodology will stop confusion in spelling and common words between the two languages. Additionally, it is highly advisable NOT to learn two languages in the same vertical grouping (i.e., Spanish, French, Italian, etc.). The languages are so similar it becomes very confusing.
- ❖ It is also advisable to watch foreign movies on Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, etc. in the targeted language, but with the native language subtitles scrolling. This process will be a slow learning process at first, but hearing the language spoken correctly with an English translation is highly beneficial. Once comfortable, reverse the process with a movie that you have viewed multiple times to provide a heightened degree of familiarity, and employ targeted language subtitles with native language audio.
- ❖ Again, approach the learning process as an emergent bilingual/LEP elementary student because that is what the adult is at this point in the acquisitional process. Read simply worded and beginning books similar to decodable readers used in the primary elementary grades. Increase the degree of difficulty as your ability permits you to do. *Duolingo* offers short stories in your language of study – these are also helpful and most likely available in many on-line platforms. Additionally, Amazon.com offers short, beginning readers at an inexpensive price. Finally, ordering elementary primary-aged books in a targeted language can be very helpful. These books are at the embryonic level of language



acquisition, and the adult learner can use them to secure a strong foundation in the same manner as a child, but of course, much more rapidly.

- ❖ If the learner does not possess access to a fluent language speaker as I do for Spanish – there are on-line services that are inexpensive. A quick Google search will yield conversational tutoring services like *italki*.
- ❖ Purchase inexpensive audio books (e.g., Amazon.com) in your selected language at the desired reading level (e.g., child or adult level) of the learner’s choice. However, it is highly recommended to purchase the paperback print version, too. Then, read the paperback as the audio book plays. This type of practice helps with honing pronunciation as well cognitive processing skills in ‘thinking’ at a controllable pace in the non-native language. Read the book over as many times until your reading pace matches the audio recording and focus on the comprehension aspect simultaneously.
- ❖ It is also important to HEAR the correct pronunciation of words and phrases. This is an extremely helpful aspect of digital web-based programs like Duolingo. Emulate the speech patterns until ‘you’ are as close to the correct as humanly possible. Write the words on a piece of paper and then practice saying the words CORRECTLY as ‘you’ write them.
- ❖ Consider labeling common items around the house with posted notes in both the targeted and the non-native languages. Review the items every time you are in that area until the spelling and name of the item is mastered. Examples: ‘la cocina’ – kitchen; ‘el tenedor’ – fork; and ‘la puerta’ – door
- ❖ Try to fit the study time in at work on lunch hour or during breaks and attempt to practice at the same time every day. Again, **CONSISTENCY IS THE KEY** in all that humans do successfully. If you miss a day, make sure that the next day you are engaged and back on track. Do not miss two days!
- ❖ There are many groups of students learning a particular language in most cities. A quick search of the internet will afford opportunities to meet like-minded people studying the same targeted language. Group meetings and outings allow additional practice in both listening and speaking skills.
- ❖ Practice how you want to play! Processing and thinking in a new language are vitally important, and there is nothing better than having simple conversations in your targeted language to learn to process and ‘think’ in that language in real time. Thus, if working with a digital program – like Mango or Duolingo – always read the sentence in the targeted language. The goal always must be to think in the new language, and not first in the native language and then, translate. In short, always practice thinking, listening and speaking in the targeted language while practicing.
- ❖ YouTube has a slew of videos that assist in both pronunciation and grammatical structure of many languages. A quick search often affords many valuable tips and insights to aid in one’s learning.



### Closing Thoughts

In this day and age, whatever topic of interest an adult desires to learn, there is an abundance of on-line, digital, video, paper-bound, and adult support groups as noted above. The onus is on the learner to take advantage of these resources and be consistent and committed in that journey. It takes serious study in any topic if a person wants to truly master the topic.

As with the many students that were under my care as a teacher or administrator, there is one empirical truism that remains valid to this day regardless of the age of the learner: *“Whatever task a person consistently engages the time, effort and required repetition, they will learn that task to mastery. Unfortunately, the converse to that statement is equally true.”*