

# a look at early language learning in Utah

by *Jacque Bott Von Houton*

The state of Utah is leading the nation in a surge of new elementary language immersion programs. Their unprecedented growth of programs, over a four-year span, has been both intentional and systemic, taking advantage of a supportive base and promoting language learning as a way to increase economic benefits for the state. While math and science are core content component, literacy, aligned to the Common Core English Language Arts, is also an important feature of their immersion curriculum.

In this interview, Gregg Roberts, Utah's Department of Education World language consultant and 2009 winner of the Pearson State Supervisor of the Year, answers questions about how the program began, what it looks like, how it builds literacy, and what is being done to sustain it.

**Q: Gregg, Utah's elementary immersion programs have been growing by leaps and**

**bounds, can you tell us what spurred the growth in early language programs in Utah and how were they funded?**

A: I was hired in 2006. At that time, former governor, John Huntsman (R) wanted to start an early language program. He formed a group of supporters and put me in touch with a state senator, who sponsored a funding bill in 2008 called the Dual Immersion Pilot Program. In this bill, the state provided a legislative line item for \$975,000 per year. Since then, we've had additional money from the state, as well as a FLAP grant for Chinese, and a STARTALK grant for professional development for our Chinese immersion teachers.

**Q: There are effective language learning programs in both the FLES and immersion styles. What made you decide to go with immersion programs?**

A: First, we researched program styles and spoke with several experts, such as Mimi Met. We wanted programs that were

cost effective to implement and that produced a higher level of proficiency. From an economic standpoint, the way we build our dual immersion program in Utah, there are no extra costs for teacher hires. In a two-teacher model, a 50/50 program requires two teachers. One teacher becomes the English teacher and one teacher becomes the second language content teacher and you have two cohorts that switch back and forth 50% of the time. There's absolutely no additional cost for a teacher—when an opening occurs you're merely replacing a regular teacher with an immersion teacher, so the program is built up year-by-year K to 6 or 8. This is a much more cost-effective model, than with FLES, where "special" language teachers have to be hired to develop a program. As far as the proficiency outcome is concerned, research tells us that, because of the added time spent in the target language, children in immersion programs achieve higher levels of proficiency and literacy

than their peers in FLES programs where less time is devoted to language learning.

For us in Utah, it's all about the money and proficiency. We think immersion is less expensive than FLES and we also think that it leads to a higher proficiency than FLES. That is why we chose immersion over FLES.

**Q: Can you describe how you designed and developed your program?**

A: After we secured funding, we hired Mimi Met for outreach and professional development for administrators and teachers. We also worked with Tara Fortune, from CARLA, who had been working with Utah's David School District. Before I was state supervisor, I worked in a school with a 50/50 immersion model program. This and another program in a school in northern Utah became the state model for immersion.

We put out an RFP to schools offering to provide seed money for new immersion programs and promising that the state would provide all the professional development for teachers, all the curriculum development for content taught in the second language and professional development for administrators.

In 2009-10 we launched the pilot. We were only supposed to start with 15 programs, however, we ended up starting with 21 programs the first year. We already had four, which gave us 25 dual immersion programs. The districts were extremely enthusiastic. We picked three languages: French, Spanish and Chinese. (Utah has memoranda of agreement with countries where these languages are spoken, thus providing a source for teachers.) The legislation required that the program be a 50/50 model and start in kindergarten or first grade. Those were the non-negotiables for dual immersion.

"Dual immersion" is the Utah umbrella term for both one-way and two-way immersion. Our objective is to simplify the terminology, combining both one-way programs and two-way programs under the term dual immersion, because they all are 50/50 instruction in Utah. We have no 90-10 programs.

One-way is when there are predominantly English speakers. Two-way is when there is a minimum of 1/3 native speakers of the other language. In Utah, that only happens in Spanish, so we have both one-way and two-way programs in Spanish. The classroom composition may be different, however, the instruction and curriculum is not.

We find the 50/50 model to be much more effective in becoming a strand in a school and all of our programs in Utah are what we call "strands".

That means they co-exist with traditional instruction in the same school, and parents have a choice of placing their children in either a dual immersion program or one with traditional English instruction.

**Q: Some principals argue that you would have to eliminate regular classroom teachers over the course of time in order to build the vertical immersion program, even if you just add one teacher per year. How do you answer that concern?**

A: Well, let me just say that we're in 57 schools now and not one teacher has lost his or her job. We maybe have had to reassign some teachers, but due to retirement, leave, or relocation, almost every school has been able to hire one new teacher per year and that one new teacher has been a language teacher, and so we have not displaced any teachers. We have received negative reactions from teachers' unions, fearing job lost, but that is an unfounded fear, because no teacher has lost a job over dual immersion. That's the beauty of the two-teacher model, and why I prefer it over the 90-10 model, because you're able to use the existing teachers already at the school to thus become

an immersion teacher in English.

**Q: Can you describe the types of school districts choosing to implement immersion programs?**

A: We have 57 dual immersion schools in Utah. Of those, 31 are Spanish immersion programs--16 two-way and 15 one-way programs. We have 17 Mandarin Chinese programs and we have 9 French programs, with a state model for each. We are in 15 school districts across the state. Those range from the largest school district in the state with 70,000 students to one of our smallest school districts, with 4,000. We have a rural school district, with 3,500 students looking to add immersion strands in each of their two elementary schools. Park City School district, with 4,000 students, plans to have dual immersion in all four of their elementary schools next year, two Spanish and two French.

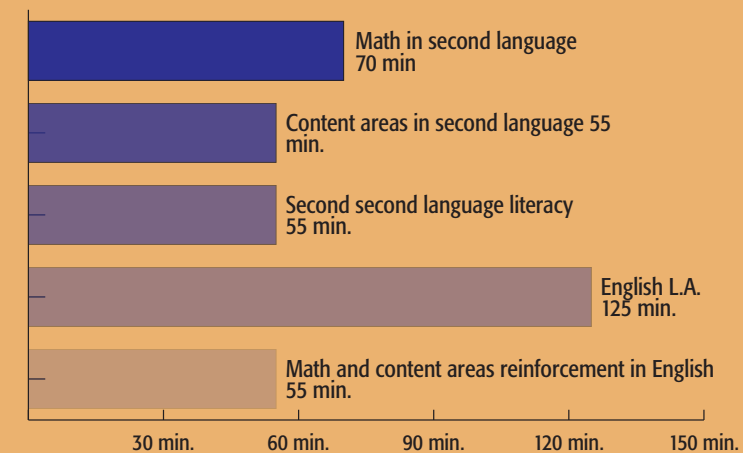
**Q: What role does Literacy play in the immersion programs?**

A: Literacy is extremely important for us. We actually provide the content in grades 1-3, so we make sure all kids are grounded in English language arts and they know how to read and write in English first before they add a second language. We're doing simultaneous literacy, so they are getting literacy in Chinese, Spanish, French, starting in first grade, but they're getting grounded in English by an established English teacher already at the school. That teacher is actually the rock of the program. Specific proficiency goals for every dual language immersion language are set at each grade level in all areas: reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

**Q: What content is taught in the target language?**

A: In grades 1-3, the majority of the literacy block is taught in English, in addition, there is reinforcement in English for math, social studies and science. In the second language block in grades 1-3, math is taught in the target language, as well as what we call integrated curriculum, which is social studies, science, health and art. We also have a literacy class taught in the target language.

In grade 4 we have a major shift. The majority of math switches back to English and at this point the literacy is divided between the two languages. We move social studies in grades 4 and 5 to the English side in order to teach Utah state history and U.S. history in English. Science continues to be in the second language. In the 6th grade, social studies (world history) returns to being taught in the second language and science switches to English. (see pie chart below)



We do not require districts to use a specific basal reading program or math curriculum on the English side of the dual immersion, but they must use the curriculum that the state

provides for the content taught in the second language.

This content is aligned to the Common Core math and English language arts.

In regard to testing, our immersion kids are scoring on par or higher than their monolingual peers in the same school in the same school population. There's no dip in our 50/50 immersion model, whereas in 90/10 students have been known to drop below their monolingual peers for a while, then catch up in 4th and 5th grades.

In math, in grades 1-3 we are doing constant benchmark testing in English to insure that those students are getting their math, as it is taught in the second language.

Our model is a K-12 model. The middle school model will start this year, in 7th grade. The students will eventually be taking Advanced Placement courses in 9th grade and doing advanced (3000 level) college work in grades 10-12. Therefore when they enter our state universities, they will only be two courses short from receiving a minor in that language, which has never been done before. Our legislature, postsecondary groups and state board of education are all on board with this and state course codes are changing to reflect it, so that 7th graders will take level 3 honors language courses, in 8th grade they take level 4 honors, and in 9th grade the AP course.

**Q: How did you convince principals that immersion was the approach to take and that it was doable?**

A: That's where Mimi Met played a key role. Back in 2008, we started having meetings with school district administrators across the state to explain what immersion education is and how dual immersion would work as a program. Then, we set up professional development for our administrators. We have a Utah School Immersion Advisory Council which meets five times a year and is made up of all the immersion principals, immersion instructional specialists and interested school district curriculum directors or administrators. This is where we share how things are going, answer questions, provide information, decide on next steps, etc. The benefit is really in the networking--principals can talk to each other and don't feel isolated. We meet three times a year as a whole group and twice in language-specific cohorts, where we discuss issues specific to that language.

**Q: Is teacher supply a problem?**

A: No. Our teachers come through local routes and as international guest teachers through state-sponsored Memoranda of Understandings with China, Spain, Mexico, France and Taiwan.

Utah instituted a relatively new dual immersion endorsement and our universities are beginning to teach courses that lead to dual language certification. For example, if you're a Spanish teacher you need the Spanish endorsement and a new dual immersion endorsement. We have a lot of elementary teachers in the pipeline who will eventually be certified for teaching in dual immersion programs.

And, we've raised the bar for our teachers. We require that all language teachers pass the Praxis exam and demonstrate Advanced mid proficiency.

English teachers must have an elementary teaching license, whereas the second language teacher may have either an elementary license or secondary license, but must have both the language specific endorsement and the dual immersion endorsement.

**Q: What professional development is provided?**

A: Professional development is addressed in two ways. We have an Annual Utah Dual Language Institute (AUDI) in summer, a week-long institute required of all our immersion teachers and we also have on-going professional development, throughout the year, where dual immersion teachers meet together four times and once within the district.

**Q: How are students assessed and is data being collected?**

A: Right now, students are being assessed by teacher observation checklists and formative assessments aligned to Can Do benchmarks. There will be common state-designed summative assessments at the end of 3rd grade. Of course, students take the usual state tests. We're able to track their performance on the standardized state tests and compare their performance to monolingual peers, because of new state course codes designations, which allow us to gather data on dual immersion enrollment (i.e., 1st grade dual immersion, 2nd grade dual immersion, etc.) With all of this data coming in, there will be opportunities for research. The Utah Education Policy Center at the University of Utah will serve as a research clearing house to vet research projects from all of our universities.

**Q: How have parents and the community reacted to the program?**

A: Honestly, they are asking, why didn't we do this 20 years ago! They've been very positive about the programs. In fact, we've had a number of angry parents who aren't able to get their children into an immersion program.

**Q: What about program sustainability?**

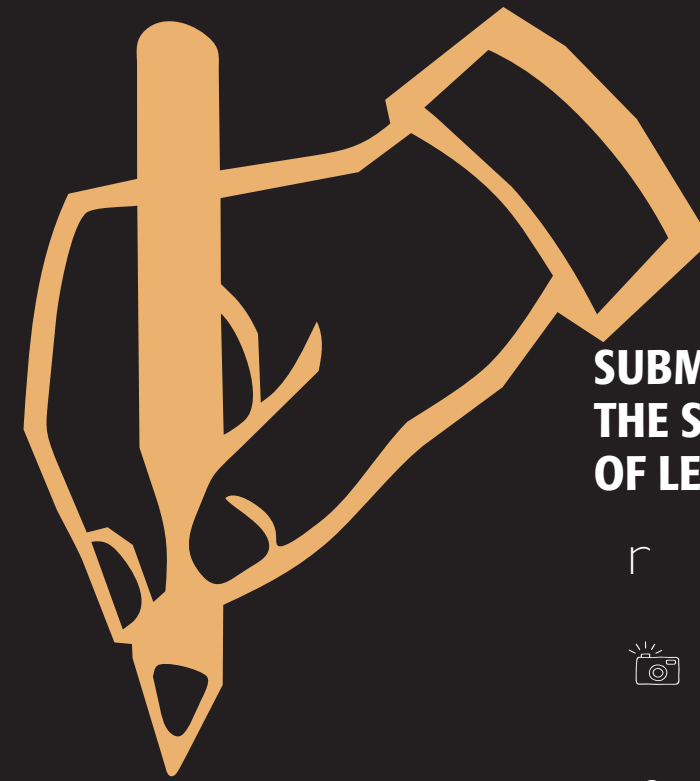
A: I don't anticipate funding being cut by the legislators any time in the future. The real beauty of immersion is that these programs, unlike FLES programs, don't get cut because they become systemic. And, we have very strong support legislatively, economically and from parents who are tremendously supportive because of the results they're seeing. The Governor, his office of economic development, the legislators, many of whom have children and grandchildren in the programs, are all behind it. And, we have a very aggressive expansion planned. One hundred programs by 2015 and we're on track to add 15 to 20 programs each year. We want to add German, Japanese and Portuguese languages because business leaders tell us they need a workforce with these language skills, in addition to Chinese, French and Spanish.

**Q: Any last thoughts, Gregg?**

A: I just encourage people to look hard at the benefits of immersion. I think it should be mainstream across America. Our goal is to make immersion education available to any parent who wants it, so that it becomes the norm rather than the exception and that's truly our goal in Utah.

For more information on the Utah Dual Language Immersion programs, go to: <http://www.schools.utah.gov/curr/dualimmersion/>

**Jacque Bott Van Houten**, president of NNELL and World Language and International Education Consultant for the Kentucky Department of Education, conducted a phone interview with Gregg Roberts, about his state's immersion initiative and later attended one of the Annual Utah Dual Language Institutes (AUDII). Hers is one of several states with immersion program initiatives in a Utah-lead consortium that seeks to share information.



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