

A FrameWorks
Communications
Playbook

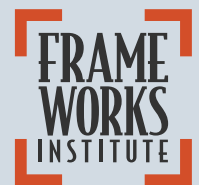


Making Room for More

**Building Support for Young Dual
Language Learners in the US**

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Introduction

Young children who are learning more than one language simultaneously—known as dual language learners, or DLLs—have the opportunity to develop native-level fluency in multiple languages. Given that less than 1 percent of American adults today are proficient in a foreign language that they studied in a US classroom,¹ it is in the nation’s interest to cultivate the emerging multilingualism of children whose families speak a language other than English. When schools don’t support home languages, children may not reach full fluency in them—but with such support, their linguistic and cultural skills become available to our communities and institutions. Moreover, when children’s “heritage language” is strong, they are better able to develop enduring relationships with their family and others in their linguistic community. In turn, a healthy identity and relationships are essential for other domains of development, like academic progress.

Yet, instead of fostering multilingualism in the early years—when the brain’s capacity for language acquisition is at its peak—the design of the typical US school system achieves the opposite. Most schools are based on a monolingual instructional model, with few schools offering intensive exposure to languages other than English in the early years. What’s more, while most Americans will agree that bilingualism is good in theory, evidence suggests that the intensity of that apparent support is quite weak. For instance, when asked to list workplace skills they consider essential, Americans are more likely to name social-media savvy than they are to name foreign language fluency. Because public opinion shapes the policy climate, dual language learning is an issue that needs to be reframed.

Understanding this, a funders collaborative—including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Heising-Simons Foundation, and the McKnight Foundation—supported the FrameWorks Institute to conduct a Strategic Frame Analysis[®]: an investigation that combines social science theories and methods to arrive at reliable, evidence-based recommendations for reframing a social issue. (See the Methods Notes on p.36–42, for more detail on the research that underlies the recommendations.) These recommendations—intended

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for mission-driven professionals who communicate about education, early learning, language, or related domains—will help to drive a more productive narrative on dual language learners.

The research suggests that communicators adopt the following framing guidelines:

1. Emphasize the academic benefits of supporting young children’s heritage language skills.
2. Repeatedly remind the public that dual language learners are young children.
3. Demystify dual language learning using explanatory techniques.
4. Explain how children benefit from learning multiple languages.
5. Explain the need for language maintenance and the risk of language loss.
6. Foreground messengers who have lived experience in classrooms that support dual language learners.
7. Take care with appeals to diversity; they can easily backfire.

Each recommendation will make a difference on its own, building greater understanding of dual language learners and their needs, and boosting support for critical changes to the nation’s approach to early learning and education. But taken together, the whole will be greater than the sum of its parts. Read on to learn about the recommendations in greater detail, about the evidence behind them, and how to put them into practice in communications.

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Reframe #1: Emphasize the academic benefits of supporting young children's heritage language skills

Experts enumerated a variety of benefits that come with multilingualism, including social, cultural, economic, and academic upsides. At the societal level, experts noted that bilingualism boosts the nation's ability to engage in global affairs and international business, and some suggested that fostering citizens' multilingualism is important for national security. As for the benefits to children, experts emphasized the links between language and the self. They noted that healthy early childhood development includes a healthy cultural identity. According to experts, a strong, positive cultural and linguistic identity is both an intrinsic good—a desirable end in itself—and an instrumental good that is essential to other ends, such as academic and social skills.

What makes this hard to get across to the public?

At first glance, communicating the benefits of bilingualism may not seem to be much of a challenge. After all, there are so many—and there is so much evidence to support the claims! What's more, FrameWorks researchers noted that ordinary Americans recognized bilingualism as a good thing—in fact, all participants stated a clear belief that bilingualism was beneficial. Study participants mentioned hearing that scientists had shown that bilingualism is “good for the brain.” Others expressed a view that the future is multilingual—and noted that bilingualism pays, literally, in the form of improved career prospects.

Dual language advocates are undoubtedly aware of these seemingly favorable sentiments, but may be less attuned to the potential communications traps that they hide. The challenge lies not in convincing the public that bilingualism is beneficial, but rather, that it is *essential* for young children whose first language is not English. This is a difficult task, as most participants—both bilingual and monolingual—held the opinion that because English is the dominant language of the country, it is only natural and practical that classrooms likewise

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be English-only spaces. It is important to note, however, that the underlying reasoning revealed care and concern for dual language learners. People suggested, for instance, that exposure to English at school would “balance out” the heritage language that children were hearing at home, so both languages would be acquired, and a native US-English accent would be cemented early. Overall, people’s arguments for English-language education rested on the assumption that it was best for the children themselves.

What does reframing need to accomplish?

Reframing needs to build on the public’s concern for young children, extending it to encompass the idea that caring for young dual language learners necessarily and always involves fostering development in their heritage language.

What helps?

Advocates should consistently lead with the idea that first-language development is essential to dual language learners’ academic growth, and explain why this is so. See [page 12](#) for examples and illustrations.

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IT'S ACADEMIC

FrameWorks recommends that the field focus on the link between first-language development and children's academic growth.

It's important to note that an academic frame need not rely on standardized test results or other narrowly defined academic outcomes. Rather, it should offer plain-language explanations that help people grasp the links between dual language learning and overall scholastic success. Here's an example:

Many young children in the United States speak a language other than English at home, and we should be supporting their academic progress by teaching them in ways that let them learn. Yet many of these children are placed in English-only classrooms. Because English is not these children's primary language, this makes it harder for them to learn subjects like math and science. As a result, they often struggle academically.

There's a better way. In the early years, children can readily acquire two languages, but interaction and support in both is essential. Dual language approaches—where children are supported in their first language and English—allow multilingual children to thrive academically. Children do well in subjects like math and science while improving their English skills more quickly. Fully bilingual classrooms enhance native English speakers' cognitive growth as well by allowing them to learn a new language.

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CONTRAST THE REALITY OF FAILURE WITH THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCCESS

In a controlled survey experiment, FrameWorks researchers tested messages with both positive and negative sentiment, and found that contrasting the two helped the public understand the connection between early dual language learning and academic progress.

Loss framing

A “negatively valenced” message emphasizes the academic costs of placing dual language learners in English-only classrooms.

Gain framing

A “positively valenced” message emphasizes the academic benefits of placing dual language learners in classrooms with first-language support.

The takeaway: Advocates should contrast the drawbacks of English-only classrooms with the academic benefits of classrooms that support dual language learners in developing bilingualism.



PRO TIP

Avoid “mixed messaging” that offers multiple reasons for the importance of dual language learning. There are a multitude of valid arguments for bilingualism in general and early dual language learning in particular, but that doesn’t mean that using them all is an effective framing strategy. Message discipline matters because the power of repetition is a key driver of shifts in public understanding. To broaden support for dual language learning policy and deepen the intensity of that support, it will be important for the field to consolidate its messaging about benefits—landing on one and avoiding others. By intentionally sharing—and staying with—frames, advocates and language experts can have a bigger effect on public understanding.

Reframe #2: Repeatedly remind the public that dual language learners are young children

Dual language learners are children who are developing proficiency in more than one language during early childhood—from birth to age eight. A distinguishing characteristic of dual language learners is that they are learning more than one language *before* they have developed full proficiency and competency in any one language. Another key characteristic of young dual language learners is that this stage of development is a sensitive period for language acquisition, in which the brain is primed for rapid progress in linguistic capacities.

What makes this hard to get across to the public?

While experts generally distinguish young dual language learners from older students, the public conflates them. When researchers talked with ordinary Americans about dual language learners, participants needed to be reminded often that the discussion was intended to focus on children aged 0–8, not older children, revealing a tendency for people to “age up” dual language learners. This tendency is not unique to the dual language learning—FrameWorks’ previous research has identified this *Aging Up* model operating on a number of issues related to early childhood—but it is particularly problematic for productive understanding of early bilingualism. When imagining dual language learners as middle or high school students, the public is less likely to consider the rapid language development capacities of the early years, and more likely to focus on the connection between English language fluency and the transitions that young adults must make to post-secondary pursuits. From here, the public concludes that it is in the students’ best interests to “learn English as quickly as possible,” and further assumes that to accomplish this, it is best to provide instruction only in English.

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What does reframing need to accomplish?

To build broader support for dual language learning, advocates must draw attention to the time-sensitive nature of early language acquisition. Communications and outreach should emphasize that there is an optimal window of opportunity for developing bilingual fluency—and that the same academic and societal benefits will not accrue if our schools fail to foster bilingualism in early childhood. Yet, in emphasizing the sensitive period for language development, advocates should avoid giving the impression that second language learning is *only* possible in the early years. This framing could undermine good policy and practice on other language issues, such as support for bilingual education for adolescents or adult learners.

What helps?

Advocates need to explicitly and consistently communicate that dual language learners are young children, always including cues that bring young children to mind. This can be accomplished in multiple ways: by specifying the age range under discussion; by mentioning preschool, kindergarten, or elementary school; by describing scenarios that involve young children; by using photographs of toddlers and preschool children. Another strategy for focusing public attention on early childhood is to appeal to brain development. Comparing early brain development to the early stages of a construction project has proven to be highly effective across a range of early childhood issues.² See [page 13](#) for examples.



FIVE WAYS TO EMPHASIZING THE “EARLY” IN EARLY DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNING

1. Give an age range.

“Our school district is considering a new curriculum and instructional methods for supporting dual language learners—students aged 5–8 who speak a language other than English at home.”

2. Mention grade levels.

“During preschool and kindergarten, children can readily acquire two languages, but interaction and support in both is essential.”

“One of the rites of passage in first grade is learning to read. Reading skills build on speaking skills—that’s why children’s books rely on words that kids already know. For first graders who speak a language other than English at home, it’s important for them to learn to read words in their heritage language as well as in English.”

3. Describe scenarios that involve young children.

“The first day of kindergarten is both exciting and a bit scary for kids and parents alike. When children are not yet fluent in English, starting school can be a source of more anxiety than usual. Dual language learning approaches—which help young children keep developing their first language while also learning English—can ensure that from the first day of school to the last, multilingual students have a chance to thrive academically and emotionally.”

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“The labels on our classroom materials are an important part of building early skills with printed language. Our first graders take pride in learning to read big words like “water fountain” and “whiteboard.” In the primary grades (grades 1–3) at Ella Baker Elementary, this “environmental print” will always appear in English, Spanish, and Amharic.”

4. Talk about early brain development.

“In the preschool, kindergarten, and primary years, the architecture of the brain is being established, and a key construction task is to learn to speak the languages around them. When children are raised in a multilingual environment, their brains get wired for both languages simultaneously. There are many ways that early childhood classrooms can offer the raw materials for dual language acquisition as the foundation is being built.”

“The good news is that in the earliest stages of life, the brain is ready and able to acquire two or more languages. On the other hand, if a young child’s first-language skills are frayed or worn away from lack of practice and use, general language and communication skills may be weakened, hampering the ability to learn not just English, but other subjects like math and science, too. To ensure that children across America have strong skills in the languages spoken in their families and communities—which includes English, but other languages, too—we should do all we can to support dual language learning in the preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school years.”

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5. Use images that help people visualize young children in learning settings.

Photographs that include the setting, rather than close-up shots of children, help to convey the important role that context plays in early childhood development, and helps to reinforce the message that these are young learners.



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Reframe #3: Demystify dual language learning using explanatory techniques

Linguistic research has demonstrated conclusively that all children—including those with learning disabilities or special needs—have an innate capacity to learn two languages readily and without confusion. For example, young children quickly learn to use the appropriate language for a given situation, as illustrated by toddlers in multilingual households who, without explicit coaching, talk to their English-speaking parents in English and their Spanish-speaking parents in Spanish. Experts note that many social and contextual factors affect whether or not children’s potential for bilingualism is fully realized.

What makes this hard to get across to the public?

Put simply, the average American knows next to nothing about how language develops or how formal education settings affect language development. Lacking this understanding, they also lack the ability to imagine any model other than English-only classrooms. People fill in these “cognitive holes” with a default assumption that the most common scenario in American education—monolingual instruction in English—is the best available option. In addition, while experts start from the understanding that children’s brains are wired to differentiate and acquire multiple languages in early childhood, the public works from a mental model that likens the brain to a container that only has so much room for knowledge and skills. From here, people conclude that learning more than one language necessarily means that some other important information or ability is displaced.

What does reframing need to accomplish?

To build support for dual language learning approaches, advocates must build understanding that young children have a natural capacity for multilingualism, and that this potential can be supported in a variety of instructional models and methods, ranging from inclusion strategies to two-way immersion programs. This is a difficult task, because it involves both adding new concepts that are

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lacking entirely *and* redirecting attention from the deeply held but unproductive models of minds and classrooms as finite spaces whose resources must be dedicated first and foremost to learning English.

What helps?

Explanation is a uniquely powerful tool for building people’s understanding of social issues, which can lead to support for policies aligned with evidence. In a survey experiment designed to test alternative ways of talking about dual language learners, we found that people who read an explanatory message were more likely to support doubling the number of bilingual elementary schools in the country and requiring schools to teach students in both of their languages. Explanatory frames emphasized *why* English-only classrooms hamper the academic experience of dual language learners and *how* dual language classrooms support them—increasing support for policies that would benefit dual language learners. See the facing page for more on general explanatory techniques, and see Recommendations 4 and 5 to find new ways to explain multilingual education and heritage language maintenance.

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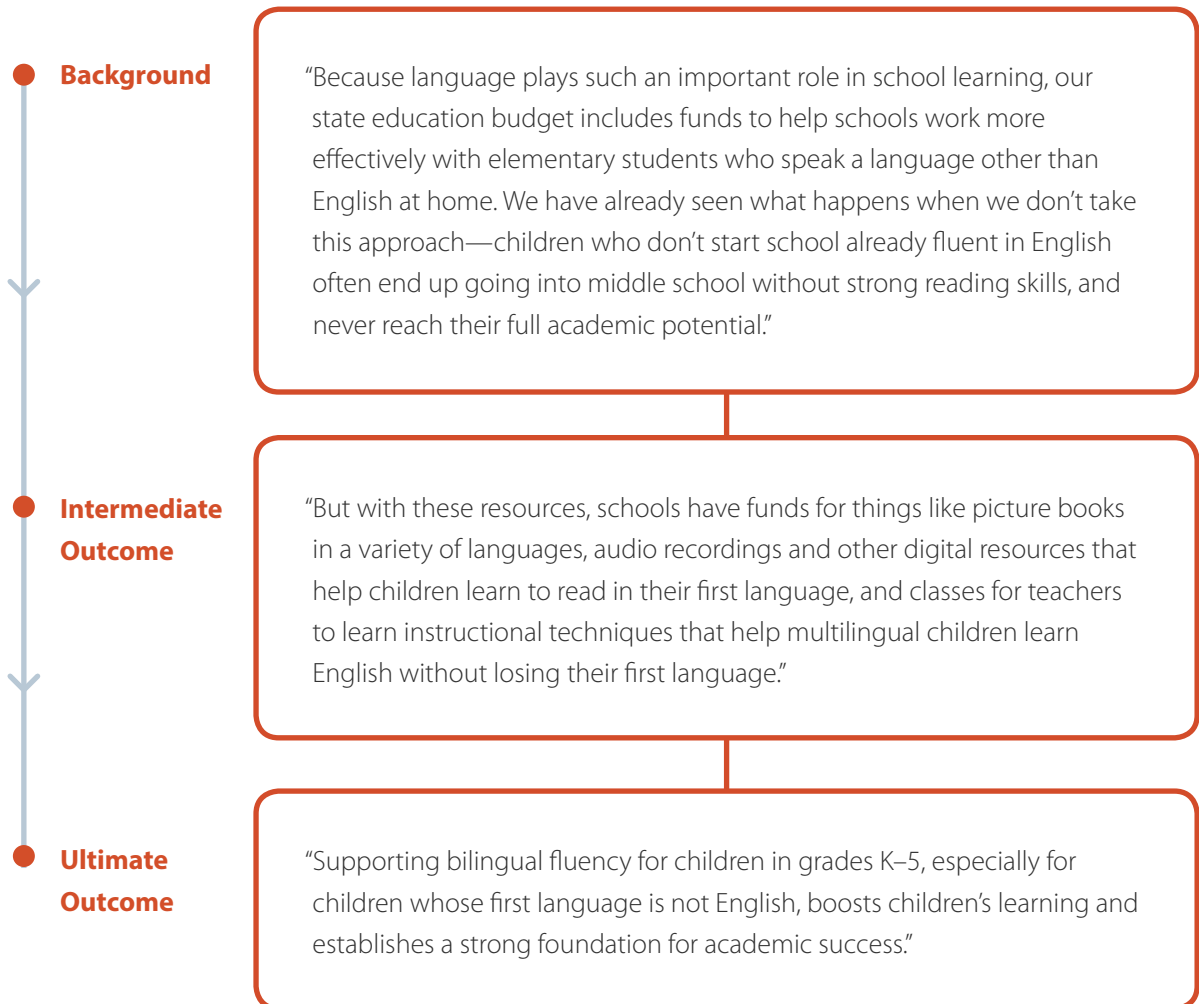


THE EXPLAINER'S TOOLKIT

By inviting people to understand how something works, an explanation yields a remarkably strong base for judgment. Communicators often think they are explaining, when in fact, they are only describing or defining things. A definition of a concept names its distinguishing characteristics; a description of an issue usually tells about the scope of the problem or its effects. An explanation, by contrast, illuminates the process. It makes mechanisms visible and clarifies connections. Read on to learn some of techniques for improving explanations.

Explanatory chains

Explanatory chains offer an unbroken linear path of logic where one idea leads to the next, connecting causes to consequences and building up shared understanding. Explanatory chains invite the public to follow a new pathway of cause-and-effect, rather than taking the cognitive shortcuts that lead to an incomplete or inaccurate understanding.



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Offer plain-language examples to illustrate key principles

Issue experts know their topics so well that they often refer to concepts that non-specialists have never even encountered. A good rule of thumb for public-facing communications is to add examples—and subtract jargon—whenever introducing an idea that is widely accepted or taken for granted in the field.

Instead of this ... ✘

Try this ... ✔

There are a range of instructional strategies that allow English-speaking teachers to support dual language learners' academic growth. With support, ESL students can simultaneously navigate language development and master grade-level concepts.

A teacher doesn't necessarily have to be bilingual to support dual language learners. Teaching strategies like the use of pictures or hands-on activities can all help young children learn science or social studies concepts while also building up their English fluency.

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Translating the “methods section” into a story

Instead of simply stating the finding of a study that bears on dual language learning policy or practice, think about whether there’s an opportunity to tell a good story on the theme of scientific ingenuity. For instance, consider the often-repeated point that infants can discriminate between the sounds of different languages spoken around them. This description of a finding would be more compelling as an explanatory story of how the finding came to be, perhaps like this:

“Researchers suspected that the ability to distinguish between languages developed in the earliest stages of life. To test their hypothesis, they designed a pacifier that could detect how intently a newborn baby slurped away. Then they played recordings of different languages for babies as they used these data-gathering pacifiers. When the recording switched from one language to another, babies that had started to relax suddenly began to suck on the pacifier more quickly. This indicated interest—interest that had been sparked by recognition of the sounds of the new language. This is just one study that has helped us understand the brain’s immense capacity for language learning in the early stages of life.”

Cause-and-effect clues

In any explanatory text, look for opportunities to add causal transition words or phrases that alert non-experts to the relationship between conditions and outcomes.

Examples of causal transition words/phrases:

- as a result
- because of this
- for this reason
- under those circumstances
- therefore
- when this happens
- etc.

Reframe #4: Explain how children benefit from learning multiple languages

Dual language learning advocates note that learning two (or more) languages in early childhood leads to important cognitive benefits. Developing two or more languages in early childhood supports overall learning capacity—for language and for other concepts. For young children, learning more than one language early in life strengthens children’s executive function skills, metacognition and the ability to understand other perspectives. By virtue of learning multiple languages, dual language learners are developing particular strengths that, with the proper support, can lead to important gains.

What makes this hard to get across?

While experts take it for granted that bilingualism is always beneficial, average Americans (both English monolinguals and bilinguals) talk about heritage languages as presenting difficulties that need to be managed. For instance, monolingual interview participants consistently assumed that dual language learners were “a bit behind” students with English-language fluency. When asked to imagine the experiences of multilingual children, they speculated about perceived deficits, struggles, and negative experiences of dual language learners. Bilingual interview participants responded somewhat differently. They didn’t talk about their heritage language as a burden, but they did note the dominance of English in the US and concluded that it was never good to be on the wrong side of a language barrier. Although US bilinguals modeled the problem differently than monolinguals, they too concluded that multilingualism was a problem to navigate rather than an asset to cultivate. Neither group’s way of thinking left much room for the view that simultaneous language development is a strength and skill that should be encouraged and supported in early childhood.

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What does reframing need to accomplish?

Advocates need to completely reorient people's understanding of children's first languages, repositioning them as an essential resource, not a regrettable difficulty. To accomplish this, the public will need to learn that children have a time-sensitive ability to acquire multiple languages readily, and that when this happens, overall learning capacity is expanded.

What helps?

Comparing a dual language learner's first language to a source of momentum that accelerates learning helps people take an asset-based view of children's heritage language (see Figure 1 on [page 26](#)). When FrameWorks tested the *Language as Momentum* metaphor with members of the public, people were more likely to describe bilingualism as beneficial and to talk about related policies as important ways to create opportunities for children. The metaphor boosted support for increasing the number of bilingual elementary schools, training all elementary school teachers to work with dual language learners, and requiring schools to teach students in both of their languages. Exposure to the metaphor also increased agreement that such changes would improve children's skills in both English and in their first languages. See the next page for more about the *Language as Momentum* metaphor and how it might be used.

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LANGUAGE AS MOMENTUM

Language as Momentum is a metaphor for the ideas that a child’s first language is a resource, and that first-language fluency is an essential to all other learning and development.

By comparing a heritage language to a fuel or accelerant, the metaphor offers people a way to think about how two languages can work together. This reduces zero-sum thinking, in which people assume the first language must come at the expense of English.

This metaphor can help communicators more consistently focus on the positive vision for bilingualism in schools. This reframing is essential: As long as people reason from the assumption that “other” languages weigh down student progress, support for dual language education will remain low.

Instead of this ... ✘

Try this ... ✔

In 2016, one in three US children lived in a household where a language other than English was spoken. Dual language learners have the potential to excel in an increasingly diverse society. However, their academic achievement lags behind that of children whose only home language is English.

When children speak a language other than English at home, it’s vital that we advance their learning in this language. First language skills create momentum that accelerates learning of English, as well as other subject matter. Children’s home language skills fuel their learning, moving them toward bilingual fluency and academic achievement.

Some students remain classified as English language learners for several years. This is typically not due to an inability to communicate in English, but because of not meeting grade-level content standards.

Children’s first language is the fuel that powers their learning—especially for young children who speak a language other than English at home. When children can’t learn in their first language, their progress in grade-level content drags—and it can take years to pick up momentum again.

It’s worth noting that the metaphor is not intended to assert that dual language learning leads to more rapid academic progress. The first language is likened to a fuel that lets learning get going—but the comparison isn’t intended to make a claim about how fast it occurs.

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Reframe #5: Explain the need for language maintenance and the risk of language loss

Experts note that children require a consistent, continuous source of quality interaction to become bilingual. This means they need rich input and extensive support through motivation to interact and communicate. It also means that a person's home language can easily be lost without continuous development. In the United States, children whose home language is not English are likely to receive less input in the home language as their social sphere widens. If the home language is not supported, language experts note, it will eventually be lost.

What makes this hard to get across?

The public, on the other hand, does not recognize the risk of language loss. Most Americans understand language as an ability that, once developed, is "frozen" into children and remains solid over time. Only former dual language learners who lost fluency in a language they spoke as a child knew, from experience, that language ability can atrophy if not exercised.

Nor do most of the American public appreciate the links between active practice, overall language development, and heritage language maintenance. Monolinguals, in particular, tended to describe language learning as a natural, biological instinct for children and as a calculated endeavor or cultivated skill for adults. Bilinguals and bilingual-adjacents shared this cultural model as well, assuming that children "pick up" language naturally. But, in contrast to monolinguals, they also talked about how important interaction was to language development.

These mental models make it hard for people to think of dual language instruction as a necessity for children who speak a language other than English at home. Because people are unaware of the risk of language loss, and unaware of how learning environments foster language development, it's easy for the public to conclude that bilingual education is a "nice extra," but not vital to children's trajectories. And with the assumption that children will

soak up language naturally, the public is unlikely to appreciate the importance of incorporating dual language instructional strategies into classrooms where the language of instruction is English.

What does reframing need to accomplish?

A key theme of reframing efforts must be that young children’s language development is dynamic—that it is sensitive to environment, instruction, and interaction. Advocates and experts should emphasize both the risk (language skills can be lost if children are not given the opportunity to practice them) and the opportunity (children can develop two languages simultaneously, with appropriate support in learning settings).

What helps?

Comparing first language maintenance to tending a garden helps the public understand that dual language learners need opportunities to practice their home language skills in order to maintain them, and that English-only classrooms can lead them to lose those skills. As illustrated in Figure 1, testing showed that the *Language Garden* metaphor effectively disrupted zero-sum thinking about language, and boosted understanding that children can learn, and keep, multiple languages with the right kind of support. See the next page for more about the garden metaphor and how it might be used.

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LANGUAGE GARDEN

Language Garden is a metaphor for the idea that multilingualism is a natural, desirable state, but that language skills can be lost if they are not actively maintained.

Language skills are like a garden—they need to be actively tended to grow and flourish. When children speak a language other than English at home, it's vital that we nurture their skills in their home language with attention and regular practice. This not only helps their skills in this language grow, but helps their English skills grow as well. If a child's skills in their home language are not nurtured, these skills may wither away.

By comparing languages to varieties in a garden, the metaphor allows people to mentally picture the productive co-existence of multiple language varieties and channels attention away from English-only thinking. More importantly, likening language maintenance to the active tending of plants—and language loss to the withering of untended plants—offers communicators a way to build a mental model of these key concepts in language acquisition.

Instead of this ... ✘

Some children whose first language is not English undergo the phenomenon of language loss. As they learn English, they lose skills and fluency in their native language if it is not reinforced and maintained. This is called subtractive bilingualism, and it can be cognitively and linguistically detrimental to children's learning and to their family lives. Ideally, children should experience additive bilingualism, where they learn English while their first language and culture are maintained and reinforced.

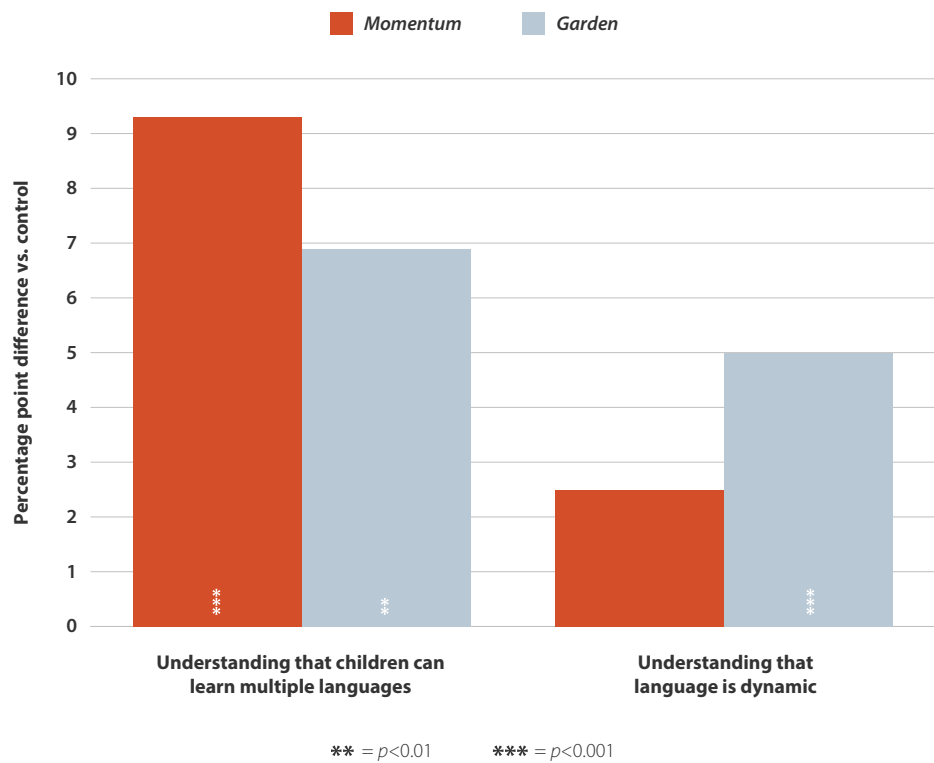
Try this ... ✔

Language skills are like a garden—there's room for many things to grow, but they need to be actively maintained. When young children who speak a language other than English at home start school, there's a risk that English will crowd out their first language. If first language skills wither, other cognitive and linguistic skills can wilt along with them. Fortunately, language skills can grow rapidly in the early years, and teachers can cultivate English skills while ensuring that the first language continues to flourish.

Figure 1: Momentum and Garden Metaphors Yielded Positive—but Slightly Different—Effects

A randomized, controlled test showed that comparing children’s first language to a source of momentum for learning was highly effective in boosting positive attitudes toward early multilingualism, but did not show significant effects on understanding of language loss.

To help people understand the need for language maintenance, the results suggest that a garden metaphor would be more effective.



Comparing first-language skills to a source of momentum was particularly effective at helping people understand that children are capable of learning multiple languages simultaneously. Likening first-language skills to a garden also helped build this concept, and was effective in helping people understand language maintenance and language loss.



Reframe #6: Deploy messengers with first-hand experience to boost support for policies that sustain dual language learning

Experts point to a number of models for supporting dual language development—all of which include some level of engagement and implementation in K–12 school systems. The ideal model, according to many experts, is a full two-way immersion program, in which part of instruction is children’s first language and part is in English. Less intensive approaches also exist and can be implemented by caregivers and teachers who are not fluent in children’s first language.

What makes this hard to get across?

While experts start from the assumption that children benefit from dual language learning approaches, members of the public have trouble connecting the dots between multilingual classrooms and the best interests of the child. Interview participants consistently expressed care and concern for children—especially young children—who encounter language barriers in school. They expressed support for kind gestures, such as teachers learning a few words of students’ first language to be able to welcome or comfort them, but assumed that this was all that could be reasonably expected. When asked to describe how a dual language classroom would work, their imaginations failed. Unable to picture effective multilingual classrooms, they instead gravitated toward the idea of “getting them to learn English as quickly as they can.”

What does reframing need to accomplish?

Advocates need to build the public’s mental model of multilingual classrooms. To accomplish this, communications should not only offer people a way to picture them easily, but to think about them as a model that is within reach. Framing must not depict them as rare bright spots illuminated by unusually bright educators, but as practical, feasible, and effective options.

What helps?

Messengers with first-hand experience of dual language learning can boost support for policies that foster home languages alongside English in elementary schools. Messengers—the person or group speaking about the issue—can shape how people receive and process information. More credible messengers can make people more likely to believe or act on a message. Perceptions of credibility can stem from different sources: messengers’ expertise, their identity, or whether or not they have a personal interest at stake in the issue. When FrameWorks tested the effect of messengers, we found that ideas attributed to a former bilingual learner or an early childhood teacher were more persuasive than the same ideas attributed to a parent in an English-monolingual family. This suggests that the credibility that comes from experience is one effective way to shift public thinking about the feasibility and practicality of dual language classrooms. See the facing page for more detail on the experiment that yielded these recommendations. Accordingly, communicators and campaigners should consider engaging teachers and students who have had positive experiences in dual language learner (DLL) classrooms, recruiting and preparing them to become spokespeople.

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LOOK WHO'S TALKING: TESTING THE EFFECTS OF MESSENGERS

To investigate the effect of messengers on the public's response to dual language learning policies, FrameWorks designed an experiment that allowed researchers to isolate the effect of the messenger type. Participants read a message formatted to look like a letter to the editor, with a call for more dual language learning programs attributed to different messengers:

- **Bilingual Learner:** Opinions were attributed to an adult who, as a Spanish-speaking child, struggled in an English-only classroom before being moved to a bilingual classroom, where he and his classmates thrived. "Thanks to this experience with bilingual education, I did well in school and am now an engineer. Also, some of my native English-speaking classmates went on to careers where they use Spanish."
- **Early Childhood Teacher:** Opinions were attributed to a kindergarten teacher who saw a positive difference when her school transitioned from an English-only model to a bilingual model. "Many students in my class—like many young children in the United States—speak a language other than English at home. Our school adopted bilingual classrooms, where lessons were taught in both children's home language and in English. This helped these children do well in subjects like math and science while also improving their English skills more quickly."
- **Parent in an English monolingual family:** Opinions were attributed to a parent whose children had many classmates who spoke languages other than English. "We speak English at home, so my child did fine, but because English was not many of the students' primary language, it was hard for them to learn subjects like math and science."

After reading the message, participants answered a series of survey questions designed to gauge their attitudes and policy preferences on dual language education. The responses of the three groups were compared to those of a control group, which received no message but answered the same survey questions.

Researchers found that the two messengers with personal experience—the former bilingual learner and the early childhood teacher—were more effective than the parent from an English monolingual family. These results are shown in Figure 2.

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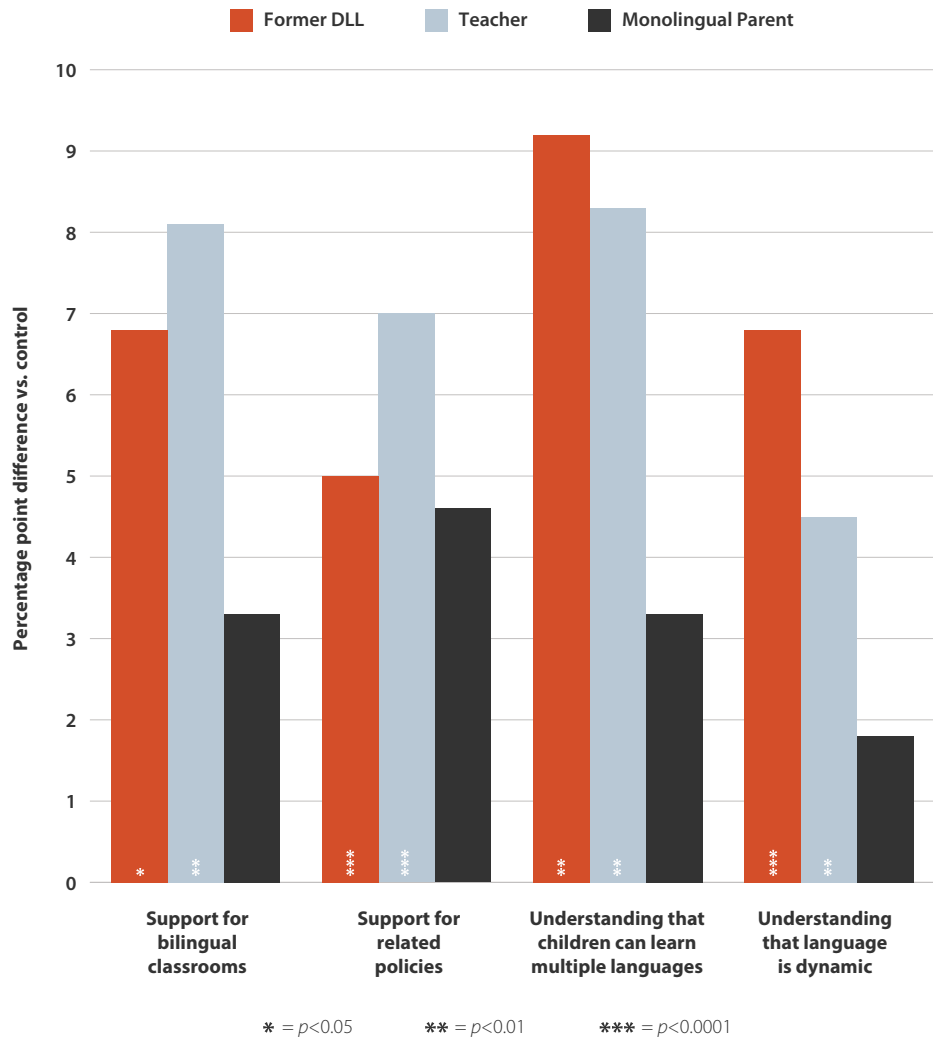
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Figure 2: Effects of Different Messengers

A randomized, controlled test showed that DLL teachers and DLL students—i.e., people with direct experience in DLL classrooms—were persuasive messengers on the need for more expansive DLL policies and funding. Communicators should consider engaging and recruiting teachers, students, or former students as spokespeople.



Reframe #7: Take care with appeals to diversity and culture; they may backfire

Experts describe dual language learners as a demographically diverse, growing segment of the US population. They note that, with time, dual language learners will make up a larger share of the working, taxpaying population, and therefore, that the US economy will hinge on their capacity to engage meaningfully in the workforce. When naming the merits of a diverse society, experts include social and cultural benefits. Experts see bilingualism as an expected, and positive, feature of “a nation of immigrants.” They note that being bilingual helps children interact seamlessly with a wider range of people, as language ability grants unique access to cultural fluency. Accordingly, experts endorse policies that support heritage language maintenance and agree that increasing bilingualism in the US would drive numerous cultural and economic benefits.

What makes this hard to get across?

While experts see multilingualism as an important component of a diverse society, the US public is more likely to assume that having a single unifying language is the easiest, most efficient way to respond to racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. Interview participants recognized that bilingualism leads to social and cultural benefits, but also revealed reservations about what embracing bilingualism would mean for the society as a whole. Monolingual participants especially held the assumption that a strong and unified country is strongly unified around one language. With prompting, this underlying assumption buttressed mostly positive reactions toward the suggestion of English as the “official” language of the United States. While some monolinguals paired this belief with expressions of goodwill toward speakers of other languages, others offer perspectives that were decidedly less inclusive and welcoming, evidencing little inclination to consider the matter from the perspective of people who speak other languages.

What does reframing need to accomplish?

Advocates for dual language learning must tap into productive cultural models of America as a welcoming, inclusive, modern society and help people extend those ways of thinking to language. To accomplish this, advocates must deftly avoid any frames that could invigorate unproductive models like *Us vs. Them* or *Zero-Sum*.

What helps?

Communicators should avoid explicit, stand-alone appeals to the value of diversity and cultural identity as the reason for embracing dual language learning. In testing, a frame emphasizing the value of cultural diversity and describing the US as a “nation of immigrants”, was counterproductive for encouraging people to support policies—most notably, bilingual classrooms. Participants who read about diversity as a key component of America’s identity were less likely to support bilingual classrooms than those in the control condition. This is in keeping with previous FrameWorks research that suggests that basing the case on demographic shifts is more likely to stoke concerns about a “flood of immigrants” than it is to awaken a sense of social responsibility. See the following page for examples of frames to avoid and frames to advance.

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NAVIGATING THE DISCOURSE ON DIVERSITY

The conversation about dual language learners is also a conversation about race, ethnicity, immigration, equity, and inclusion. Yet, if communications aren't framed carefully, conversations could inadvertently reinforce unproductive misconceptions, or miss opportunities to broaden the coalition working for change. These examples illustrate shifts in framing that invite a more productive discussion.

Less effective

The demographic changes that have swept cities and towns across the United States are well documented. Over the past two decades, immigration rates to the United States have reached levels unmatched since the early 1900s. The dual language learner population has spiked in recent years, increasing by a whopping 24% since the year 2000. And today, foreign-born immigrants and refugees are more likely to settle in non-traditional destinations. Immigrant populations used to be concentrated in states like California, New York, or New Jersey, but the challenge of language diversity in the classroom is now one that schools everywhere in America must face.

What's more, children growing up with exposure to a language other than English are an increasingly diverse group, representing a dizzying range of languages and cultures. School districts must manage not only Spanish, but an influx of wide range of languages. This "diversification of diversity"—sometimes called "superdiversity"—has important implications for early childhood programs and schools, as distinct immigrant groups have distinct challenges, needs, and cultural sensitivities.

- The demographic shift framing in this paragraph reinforces an unproductive, but widely shared, assumption that America is being "flooded" with people from other countries.
- Avoid 'otherizing' terms like "foreign-born" or "immigrant population." These phrases paint immigrants as "them," distinct from "us."

- Avoid phrasing that could leave the impression that immigrants are putting undue pressure on systems or making unreasonable demands for accommodation.

More effective

Throughout its history, America's schools have included children who speak a variety of languages. Today, about one in three of young children in the US (birth through age eight) speak a language other than English at home. And more so than in the past, families who come to our country are more likely to make their homes in cities and towns without a history of immigration, such as Nashville, Boise, or Omaha. That's why school districts nationwide are updating their approaches to early education to make the most of the developing brain's capacity to gain fluency in multiple languages. Dual language approaches—where children are supported in their first language and English—allow multilingual children to thrive academically.

- This opening doesn't use the word diversity, but advances the idea that America has always been linguistically diverse.
- Describing educational reforms as 'updates' helps to redirect unproductive nostalgia for an idealized past.
- The 'brain frame' is a more effective way to add urgency to a message than a 'demographic shift' frame.



Conclusion

The cultural and historical currents that are moving the United States away from multilingualism are strong. The framing research described here offers empirically tested tools that can be used to shift the landscape, and therefore redirect the flow of public thinking. If communicators across the education, early childhood, and language policy sectors strategically deploy these reframing strategies, they can fundamentally shift how the public thinks about language development and create a policy climate where multilingualism is valued, fostered, and can flourish. This is long-term, challenging work—which means that the time to begin to reframe dual language learning is now.

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Methods Note #1: What communications research does a field need to reframe an issue?

The recommendations in this playbook are based on a multi-method, iterative set of investigations in which one dataset and analysis fed into the next. The questions explored were:

WHAT DOES THE FIELD KNOW THAT THE PUBLIC SHOULD KNOW?

A Strategic Frame Analysis begins with distilling expert consensus on big ideas the public needs to know in order to become more informed citizens, less susceptible to misinformation or spin, and better equipped to engage in productive dialogue about proposals advanced in the public sphere. To distill expert perspectives on dual language learners in the US, FrameWorks conducted 12 one-hour one-on-one interviews with researchers in the field of language development and dual language learning. Common themes were pulled from the interviews to arrive at a set of key concepts about dual language learners.

HOW DOES THE PUBLIC THINK?

Before designing efforts to change mindsets, it is helpful to anticipate how and why the issue is currently understood. To discern existing mental models on language learning in early childhood, FrameWorks conducted in-depth individual interviews with English-speaking monolinguals, self-identified bilinguals, and “bilingual adjacents,” or adults who had studied another language extensively but did not consider themselves bilingual. By looking for patterns across the interviews, researchers identified shared cultural models—widely held understandings and assumptions that structure public thinking—and pinpointed some areas where thinking differed between monolinguals

and bilinguals. Thirty interviews were conducted in Greenville, SC; Los Angeles; Phoenix; and Minneapolis in December 2016 and January 2017. These locations were selected to ensure the sample included people from areas with history as immigrant destinations (i.e., Los Angeles and Phoenix), as well as people from regions that are newer destinations for immigrants (i.e., Greenville and the Twin Cities).

For a fuller description of the public's cultural models about dual language learners and how they compare to experts' understandings, see an accompanying study from FrameWorks: *When more means less: Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of dual language learners.*

WHAT FRAMES SHIFT THINKING?

To systematically identify effective ways of talking about dual language learners, FrameWorks developed a set of possible ways of shifting public understanding. These candidate reframes were tested in 2018 and refined using two methods:

- 1.** Fifty-three rapid, face-to-face on-the-street interviews in Houston and Nashville to test the ability of various frames to prompt productive and robust thinking about dual language learners.
- 2.** A controlled survey experiment involving 5,876 respondents to test the effects of various messaging frames on public understanding, attitudes, and support for programs and policies. The sample was nationally representative in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, education, and household income. Methods Notes 2, 3, and 4 provide more detail on the experiment design.

All told, nearly 6,000 people from across the United States were included in this research.

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Methods Note #2: Building an empirical case for communications decisions

To find the most effective frames for policies that support dual language learners, FrameWorks designed an empirical test of the effects of highlighting economic, academic, or cultural benefits.

This quest came with methodological challenges: Given that most people will agree that fostering bilingualism is generally a good thing, how could the study avoid a “ceiling effect” in which different responses to varying messages were masked by overall high rates of support? And, perhaps more importantly, how could the study be designed to discern whether the tested frames could move people beyond mere passive acceptance to enthusiastic endorsement of policies that support dual language learners?

To resolve these dilemmas, tested messages and the control message were all built around a fictional legislative proposal that would “invest \$10 billion over 10 years to support dual language learners—children who speak a language other than English at home.” In every condition, the act was described as including three policies suggested by issue experts: “If the Act is passed, the government will double the number of bilingual elementary school teachers in the country, train all teachers to work with dual language learners, and require schools to teach students in both of their languages.”

Including these clear policy and program ideas in the messages raised the “ceiling” for support in two ways. First, this reduced the risk of “sure, sounds good” responses—superficial approval of an idea so vague as to be unobjectionable. Second, by associating the policy proposal with a specific—and steep—price tag, researchers could differentiate which messages led to moderate support and which sparked strong support. The analysis could distinguish generally favorable attitudes that might fail to translate into policy support in the face of a trade-off from more intense support that would lead people to support good dual language learning policy despite significant costs.

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The results of the survey experiment showed that framing dual language learning as an academic issue led to significantly stronger support for policies that would build heritage language maintenance into US schools. In open-ended responses, participants who read about academic reasons for supporting dual language learners wrote more about education, largely describing the proposed policies as beneficial for educational outcomes and educational experiences; about classrooms, often reflecting on the benefits of classrooms that incorporate more languages; and about teachers, describing the importance of properly training teachers to work with DLLs and recruiting more bilingual teachers overall.

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Methods Note #3:

A sound experimental design for determining effective frames

To arrive at a set of framing tools and tactics that advocates can use with confidence, FrameWorks designed a series of randomized, controlled survey experiments that tested the effects of different frame elements on public attitudes, knowledge, and policy preferences.

The variables of interest were frame elements—language choices that have been shown to affect how people understand, interpret, and act on a communication—which, in this case, included different ways of using explanatory metaphors, issues, and messengers. To determine the effects of various frame elements researchers first created short messages that incorporated one or more frame elements. Each frame element was embedded in a description of a fictional (but realistic) piece of legislation (an “act”) that included a number of measures that experts identified as necessary for supporting DLLs. (See Methods Note #2 for more detail on this aspect of the experiment.)

From a large, nationally representative sample of US residents, a survey experiment randomly assigned participants to different messages and then asked them to complete a survey, whose items were also randomized. (See Methods Note #4 for more about the survey batteries.) The results associated with each frame were compared with each other and with the responses of a control group, which received only a basic description of the act and answered the same survey questions. Multiple regression analysis was used to determine whether there were significant differences in responses to questions between the treatment groups and the control group.

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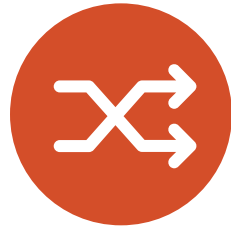
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This sound experimental design—a hallmark of Strategic Frame Analysis®—gives researchers confidence that differences between treatment groups are due to frames and not extraneous factors.



Sample

>5,000 online participants
(nationally representative sample)



Random assignment to treatment or control group



Treatment groups

- 1. Frame A
- 2. Frame B
- 3. Frame C
- 4. Control (no prime)



Outcome measures

- 1. Attitudes
- 2. Knowledge
- 3. Policy support



Analysis

Differences between treatment and control groups
(controlling for demographic viability)

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Methods Note #4: Which frame “works”? That’s an empirical question

A frame “works” when it leads to the desired communications outcome. To determine the effects of different frame elements, researchers tested frames head-to-head and looked to see which messages made the most difference on people’s understanding, attitudes, and policy preferences. The table below provides the batteries—groups of survey items that explore a particular theme—and an example of a survey question from each battery.

Theme	Sample Question
Understanding: Children Can Learn Multiple Languages	If dual language learners receive some of their education in their home language, which of the following do you think is most likely to happen? a. They will learn both their home language and English successfully. b. They will struggle to learn both their home language and English. c. They will be fluent in their home language, but not in English.
Understanding: Language is Dynamic	When dual language learners are in English-only classrooms, they are likely to lose their ability to speak and understand their home language. Agree or disagree?
Support for Bilingual Classrooms	How much do you favor or oppose classrooms where dual language learners are encouraged to use their home language while also learning English?
Support for Related Policies	How much do you favor or oppose doubling the number of bilingual elementary school teachers in the country?
Attitudes about Immigration	Reverse Coded: Immigrants have jobs that Americans should have. Agree or disagree?
Open-Ended	In your opinion, what are the best ways to support children whose home language is not English?

Endnotes

- 1 Bryan Caplan, a George Mason University economist, arrived at this estimate by analysing self-reported data from the 2000 and 2006 General Society Surveys.
- 2 Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2014). *A Decade of Science Informing Policy: The Story of the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child*. Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

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ABOUT FRAMEWORKS

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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Making Room for More **Building Support for Young Dual** **Language Learners in the US**

A FrameWorks Communications Playbook

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