

Viewpoint: Why bilingualism is important for economic development

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Any business looking to relocate or expand in a particular area will need and will expect to find individuals with the skills they require. That is why one of the key components communities tout in every economic development proposal is a skilled workforce.

As the United States becomes a more diverse nation, the list of skills that businesses need and expect [includes a workforce's ability to communicate in more than one language](#). Not only is this important in construction and manufacturing, where communication is critical among workers, it is also vital in service and retail sectors.

Customer bases today are more diverse as well, and if workers cannot communicate with customers who are not native English speakers, that is an entire population a business cannot serve — meaning lost economic opportunity.

Why is someone who has worked in bilingual education for almost two decades talking about business and workforce development? We expect our schools to deliver graduates who can succeed in business. Further, the ability to communicate in more than one language creates greater opportunities for success for both businesses and graduates.

Albuquerque recently hosted the National Association for Bilingual Education's annual meeting, which highlighted dual-language learning. Educators and business leaders agree there are obvious advantages to learning a second language at an early age. But there is no better time than now for anyone to begin learning; technology has created better ways for people at any age to work toward bilingualism and biliteracy. From websites to downloadable apps, anybody with access to a computer, tablet or smartphone can boost both receptive and productive skills in more than one language.

In fact, many digital resources guide learners through a natural experience beginning with basic interpersonal communication skills. If used as designed, the digital tools increase the difficulty gradually, allowing learners to achieve ideal cognitive academic language proficiency. However, these linear paths from basic to advanced academic

skills have been overtaken by what is known as “adaptive capability.” This feature has revolutionized the field of bilingual education.

A decade ago, I began working for an education technology company developing computer-adaptive reading programs for both English and Spanish elementary classrooms. At that time I thought I was really entering the future. What an incredible concept poised to impact education in the 21st century.

I am talking about a remarkable innovation that takes bilingualism from a mere language-acquisition experience to a new level of personalized second-language development. This means each learner has an individualized path that unfolds through interaction with a tool that adapts to the specific skills and knowledge of the user. The idea is to create a learning experience unique to an individual’s own ability.

This technology reflects the modern reality: American children today are exposed to bilingualism (English and Spanish) from birth to age 5 more than ever before. This creates an opportunity to enhance learning because the education system, which has always had “foreign language” requirements, now can do more. Now, school districts increasingly implement dual-language and bilingual education programs that give students the support necessary to become bilingual and biliterate by the time they graduate.

As research continues to emerge, sequential and simultaneous bilingual education approaches are inundating our education systems in support of the “seal of biliteracy” that many states, including New Mexico, have established. This high school achievement rewards students who are proficient in both receptive and productive skills. In other words, they can listen, read, write and speak in two languages. The rewards of bilingualism plus the widespread use of adaptive technology in the classroom have resulted in long waiting lists of students whose parents eagerly want them to take advantage of this perfect timing to become bilingual.

For businesses and industries, this means an entirely new generation of graduates and prospective employees will have language skills that provide value to employers. Communities that invest in this kind of dual-language and bilingual education will have a leg up on the competition in the battle to attract new economic opportunities. This is why I insist: Becoming bilingual and biliterate has never been more possible – or important – than it is now.

Viviana Hall started her career as a bilingual teacher in 1997 and has been instrumental in the development of Spanish-language products for Istation, an education technology company based in Dallas. She is a national educational consultant and was a presenter at the recent 2018 National Association for Bilingual Education conference in Albuquerque.

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