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INTERNATIONAL LITERACY ASSOCIATION

# The Importance of Dyadic Classroom Conversations for Dual Language Learners

*Cecilia Jarquin Tapia, Sarah Surrain, Stephanie M. Curenton*

This case study shows the difference that group size made for one dual-language learner (DLL) preschooler. Dyadic conversations can support DLLs' active engagement in conversations.

Miss Yasmín: ***Okay mira. ¿Qué es esto, Christopher?*** (Okay, look. What is this, Christopher?)

Christopher: Nose.

Miss Yasmín: Nose, nose, ***nariz***, nose.

Christopher: ***Yo tengo una*** nose [touches his nose]. (I have one nose).

Miss Yasmín: ***Sólo una***. Just one, right? You do one, Christopher, one. [points to paper where he should draw the nose].

Christopher: Only one nose.

Miss Yasmín: Only one nose.

Christopher: I want to have three noses!

Like a growing number of students in the United States, Christopher is a dual-language learner (DLL) (all names are pseudonyms). DLLs are young children learning two languages simultaneously or sequentially. Christopher's home language is Spanish, and he attends a Head Start preschool program in a mid-Atlantic state. The program instructs in English but encourages teachers to incorporate children's home languages as needed.

In this excerpt from a dyadic conversation with his bilingual (Spanish–English) teacher, Miss Yasmín, Christopher playfully describes facial features while drawing a picture for his mom. He effortlessly moves between English and Spanish, confidently saying that although he has one nose, he wishes he had three. This interaction is very different from the whole group and smaller DLL group lessons Christopher took part in on the same day. While his classmates spoke freely to the teacher or raised their hands, Christopher sat quietly throughout the whole group lesson. In the smaller DLL group lesson, he did not participate. However, during the dyadic interaction, Christopher was engaged and talkative, perhaps because more Spanish and more *codeswitching* (alternating between English and Spanish) were used.

To facilitate learning and increase participation for a DLL like Christopher, who is less engaged in classroom discussions, we observed that dyadic conversations personalized learning, validated his home language, and ultimately increased his participation.

## DLLs and Bilingual Development

DLLs begin learning two or more languages at a young age. In addition to the importance of DLLs' bilingualism for family communication and identity development (e.g., Oh & Fuligni, 2010), multiple studies have shown cognitive benefits of being bilingual. Being able to attend to and control the use of two languages may improve children's attentional control and mental flexibility, referred to as the *bilingual advantage* (see Barac et al., 2014 for a review).

As DLLs develop skills in each language, they learn to alternate between their languages in sophisticated and creative ways (Yow et al., 2018). Though DLLs' language practices may differ from a monolingual view of "correct" usage, the unique linguistic strengths that DLLs bring to the classroom align in many ways with the literacy skills students need to thrive in school and life (Martinez, 2010; Palmer & Martínez, 2016). However, these strengths are

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not always recognized or fostered in schools. Without support for bilingualism, many DLLs decline in their home language use and skills while struggling with reading comprehension in English (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2017).

Therefore, it is necessary to validate a DLL's use of both English and their home language from a young age. Building on their strengths as emergent bilinguals lays the foundation for later literacy outcomes in English.

## Supporting DLLs in the Classroom

The use of DLLs' home language for instruction has been linked to improved learning outcomes (e.g., Burchinal et al., 2012). Recent scholarship proposes that DLLs' learning is supported by *translanguaging*, or drawing on bilingual children's full linguistic repertoire to make meaning (García & Wei, 2014). Codeswitching, or the alternation between languages within a single conversation, is just one way that bilinguals engage in translanguaging (García, 2009). Codeswitching in the classroom creates a safe space for DLL students to deploy home language practices, involves students in activities, and assists students in making connections with their lives outside of the classroom (Gort & Pontier, 2013).

Higher quality teacher–student relationships can also promote academic success for DLL students. Oades-Sese & Li (2011) found that high-quality teacher–student relationships were associated with higher levels of language skills and stronger parental attachment. Teachers who described relationships with their bilingual preschoolers as close also reported more frequent, longer conversations. We speculate that one-on-one conversations might foster these relationships because the student has more opportunities to initiate topics and may feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences.

When incorporating strategies to support DLL students in the classroom, it is important to remember that these students are a diverse group, each with different levels of exposure to and proficiency in each of their languages (López & Foster, 2021). Therefore, strategies for DLLs should focus on the individual child and provide opportunities to use their home languages. Strategies that support DLL students in this way may be easier to implement in small group settings, which explains why small group interventions have been shown to positively impact DLL students' literacy and social-emotional outcomes (Landry et al., 2019).

### PAUSE AND PONDER

- How do you currently incorporate dyadic conversations in your classroom?
- In what ways do your students use their home language during your lesson?
- What are some successes you have had with supporting DLLs' participation and/or engagement?

However, even in small groups, quieter DLL students might not have as many chances to speak as students who are more talkative. For quieter DLL students, it is important to have dyadic conversations that build students' confidence in initiating conversations (Hadley et al., 2020). Making time for these conversations during mealtimes or playtime can help teachers reach DLL students who have difficulty participating in classroom discussions. In this article, we present a case study of Christopher's participation across whole group, small DLL group, and dyadic conversations. We show how personalized one-on-one conversations benefited Christopher, a DLL student who was less engaged and quieter than his peers in group settings.

## Christopher in Whole Group

First, we see Christopher in a 13-minute whole group lesson with eight other students, both DLL (n=6) and non-DLL (n=2). The lesson is mostly in English with only six words in Spanish (see Table 1). Miss Yasmín begins with a game. She tells them to put their hands on their knees and then places her hands on a different body part, such as her head. Most of the students immediately notice when Miss Yasmín's actions do not match her words. They tell her she is wrong and point to their knees. But Christopher mimics her movements instead of following her verbal instructions.

Miss Yasmín continues to the main lesson about how mail is delivered. To have students make predictions, she demonstrates a fantasy-based scenario in which Curiosity, their classroom stuffed animal, finds a package at his doorstep and wants to know who left it there. While his peers enthusiastically answer Miss Yasmín's questions about mail, Christopher does not speak at all.

## Christopher in DLL Group

Next, Christopher participates in a smaller DLL group lesson with six other Spanish-speaking DLL students. Extending the theme of the whole group lesson, Miss Yasmín introduces an emergent writing activity to "write" a letter to a friend or family member. She explains that she will draw a picture to send to her mom. Each student except Christopher engages in this activity and puts their "letter" in the "mailbox." Although this 20-minute lesson is mainly in English, Miss Yasmín increases her

**Table 1**
**Language Use Across Settings**

| | Whole Group | DLL Small Group | One-On-One |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Classroom Settings** | | | |
| *Lesson Duration* | 13 minutes | 20 minutes | 8 minutes |
| *Total Students* | 9 | 7 | 1 |
| **Miss Yasmín's Language Use** | | | |
| *Total Words Spoken* | 1194 | 1704 | 730 |
| *% Spanish Words* | 0.5% (6 words) | 5% (91 words) | 15% (112 words) |
| *# of Codeswitches* | 7 | 39 | 45 |
| **Christopher's Language Use** | | | |
| *Total Words Spoken* | 0 | 14[1] | 141 |
| *% Spanish Words* | - | 29% (4 words) | 21% (30 words) |
| *# of Codeswitches* | - | 2 | 15 |

*Note.* [1]Does not include words spoken to partner during peer-to-peer talk, as these could not be transcribed because the utterances were unclear.

codeswitching (see Table 1). Her codeswitches signal to the students that it is okay to use their home language, which might make them feel welcomed and comfortable even if they decide not to use Spanish.

Christopher is more engaged in this lesson than he was in the whole group. Miss Yasmín asks Christopher to repeat the word *mail*. Then, she asks the other students questions in English, but asks Christopher the same question in Spanish, which he answers in English. He mouths words such as "big" and "small" that Miss Yasmín uses to describe the markers they can use. Miss Yasmín has the students pair up and talk to each other. It is unclear what is said, but Christopher does speak to his partner, pointing out things around the classroom (see Table 1).

Later in the lesson, another student, Jason, tries to initiate a conversation with Christopher, saying "Christopher, ***mira*** my picture," but Christopher does not respond. Miss Yasmín notices and tells Jason in both English and Spanish that Christopher is shy. The acknowledgment of Christopher's unique personality may help the other students understand why he is quiet sometimes.

Despite the additional individualized supports in this setting, Christopher does not engage in the activity. He stares at his blank paper and looks around to see the other students' drawings. At times, he seems frustrated, holding his head in his hands.

## Christopher's Dyadic Lesson

Immediately after the DLL group lesson, Miss Yasmín engages in an 8-minute one-on-one lesson with Christopher where they continue the letter-writing activity. Christopher decides to send a letter to his mom, so Miss Yasmín helps him draw a picture of her. She codeswitches between Spanish and English more frequently than in the smaller DLL group. As they talk, Miss Yasmín reviews the marker colors and the body parts in the drawing. When she asks questions, Christopher uses both his languages to respond. For example, she asks him, "***¿Ojos, cuántos ojos tienes?*** (Eyes, how many eyes do you have?)" and Christopher counts three eyes on his face in English. Miss Yasmín counts two eyes in English and gives the Spanish translation "***Uno, dos***" which Christopher repeats in Spanish.

This lesson results in a personal conversation about Christopher's family. He jokes about his "big ***mami***," even describing her big belly. He playfully proposes the idea of drawing his mom with three eyeballs and wishes for three noses for himself. He and his teacher laugh while discussing the right number of fingers and legs to add to his drawing. By describing his mom, Miss Yasmín provides words for different body parts in Spanish and English. Christopher repeats the words and seems comfortable conversing. He speaks the most in this setting and while Miss Yasmín creates an environment where Christopher can speak as much Spanish as he wants, he mostly speaks English with occasional repetitions of single words in Spanish.

Taking the time to talk with Christopher alone results in him successfully engaging in the DLL small group activity. Finally, Miss Yasmín tells him that the mail carrier "***viene más tarde*** (is coming later)" so his letter can go in the mailbox. Christopher responds, "I'll put it!".

## Creating Conversation with DLL Students

Throughout the dyadic conversation, Christopher introduced new topics and finished his drawing for the emergent writing activity. Elements from this dyadic conversation can be incorporated into classrooms to help students like Christian. In the one-on-one setting, Miss Yasmín asked him questions in Spanish even though he usually responded in English. In classrooms, a teacher can present a question or statement in English and Spanish to signal that both languages are valuable and can be used to make meaning. For a student like Christopher, who did not raise his hand nor participate during whole group, teachers can have them voice their opinions or answer questions in peer-to-peer conversations like Miss Yasmín did in the small DLL group. Teachers can follow up by asking students about their conversations.

To engage students and make them aware of their strengths as a dual-language learner, teachers should create conversational feedback loops using both languages. These loops do not have to be as long as the conversation in this case study but can occur during lunchtime or playtime. These conversations should focus on intentional listening, asking open-ended questions, and responding to what the student said.

## Conclusion

In this dyadic conversation, Christopher was talkative and used his imagination and humor in a way that was not seen in the whole and DLL group lessons. Making time for dyadic conversations with DLL students, especially those who are reluctant to participate in larger groups, can help them feel more comfortable in the classroom. Dyadic conversations provide opportunities for students to use both their home language and English, make connections between home and school, and express their ideas. Teachers can use codeswitching and peer-to-peer talk to engage all students. Supporting these oral language skills can help bridge the gap in later literacy outcomes for DLL students and set them up for future success.

### TAKE ACTION!

1. Take note of students who are less engaged than their peers
2. Seek out opportunities to engage these students in dyadic conversations and pose open-ended questions such as those starting with why and how
3. If you are familiar with a student's home language, make sure to incorporate words or phrases in that language when speaking with them
4. If you are unfamiliar with a student's home language, try asking them how to say and pronounce a word in their language

## Conflict of Interest

None

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## MORE TO EXPLORE

- For an article with practical strategies for supporting DLLs in early childhood classrooms: https://www.luc.edu/media/lucedu/cpell/cpellresources/meetingthehomelangage.pdf
- For case-studies of exemplary early childhood classrooms serving DLLs: Baker, M., & Páez, M. M. (2018). *The language of the classroom: Dual language learners in Head Start, public pre-k, and private preschool programs* (pp. 1–36). Migration Policy Institute. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/SuperdiversityClassroomLanguages_Final.pdf
- For a podcast episode on using children's home languages in the classroom: https://kletsheadspodcast.org/2021/06/18/how-to-make-use-of-bilingual-childrens-home-languages-in-the-classroom-translanguaging-season-1-episode-9/