

Classroom Labels that Young Children Can Use: Enhancing Biliteracy Development in a Dual Language Classroom

Learn how to support biliteracy development through print-rich classrooms.

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Biliteracy is defined as literacy development including reading, writing, and speaking in two languages (Escamilla et al., 2014). Print-rich classrooms can enhance literacy development for all students, but can be particularly helpful for dual language learners for biliteracy development. This article focuses on biliteracy development of English and Spanish through the practical strategy of systematically labeling the classroom within the context of daily classroom activities and providing children with various opportunities to use the words throughout the day. Initially, a theoretical rationale for the use of labels with dual language learners is provided followed by practical ideas related to the use of labels in the context of teacher's daily work. Using the foundational work related to classroom labels from Pinnell and Fountas (1998, 2010), we adopt a definition indicating that "a label consists of one or a few words on a card placed on or below an object or a spot in the classroom" (p.36).

Why Are Classroom Labels Critical for Dual Language Learners?

Providing young dual language learners opportunities to use language in both the spoken and written form contributes to their understanding of the words they hear and the connections between those words and the labels found around the classroom. In other words, the classroom walls, the bulletin boards, the alphabet, and the labels should reflect two languages. Both their home language and their new language have a special function in the classroom to support language and biliteracy development (Eliason & Jenkins, 2012). Labels, in

particular, help create an understanding about the functions of print and how print conveys meaning (Fountas & Pinell, 2010). Classroom labels serve as visual models of print that contribute to the development of sound-symbol awareness, grammatical knowledge, and vocabulary knowledge in both English and Spanish. These basic skills combined with children's sociocultural variables may contribute to the biliteracy development of dual language learners (Castro, Paez, Dickinson, & Frede, 2011).

**Print-rich
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Children who are learning a second language while developing their native language competencies are considered dual language learners (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & McLaughlin, 2008; Espinosa, 2010; Gomez & Gomez, 2012). Although, at first, young dual language learners might not actually read classroom labels in their second language, their native language serves as a bridge to success in English. There is familiarity in the "decoding, sound blending, and generic comprehension strategies ... between languages that use phonetic orthographies, such as Spanish, French, and English" (Espinosa, 2010, pp. 82-83). Many language and literacy skills in a child's first language will transfer effectively to English and can assist them in developing the necessary literacy skills

to successfully read their classroom environment (August & Shanahan, 2006; Paez & Rinaldi, 2006). For the young dual language learner, infusion of meaningful and functional print creates a supportive classroom environment that influences language and literacy development in and through two languages.

According to transfer theory, what children learn in their native language will be transferred to their second language (August & Shanahan, 2008; Gutierrez, Zepeda, & Castro, 2010). From this perspective, we can imply that environmental print found in their second language also builds support for their native language competencies. Encouraging children to explore a biliterate classroom environment with labels and other print materials enhances their linguistic and cognitive development in two languages. It is important to note however, that the classroom environment should be equally labeled in both languages so children understand that both languages are validated and that English acquisition is not at the expense of their native language development (Collier & Thomas, 2009; Espinosa & Burns, 2002, 2003). Thus, being surrounded by labels in two languages may not only contribute to children's biliteracy development, it may also enhance their social and emotional development. As dual language learners see their language reflected in their classroom they become risk takers. They start exploring the labels that are known to them and then eventually start reading their new language.

Designing Your “Labeled” Classroom Environment

Effective classroom labels support the biliteracy development of

young dual language learners. These labels serve as visual references and also help keep the classroom structured by assisting young children in identifying where to find materials, where to put them away, and how to keep the environment organized. In essence, the labels around the classroom assist young dual language learners to get things done.

Displaying an abundance of print however, is not sufficient to make print meaningful (Love, Burns, & Buell, 2007). Labeled references are only helpful to young children if they are allowed to use the classroom labels in interactive activities throughout the day. Otherwise, labels may become part of the classroom space and act merely as wallpaper.

Developing biliteracy also requires that the classroom environment be established to be a predominantly social setting where children are provided with many opportunities to interact with each other and the labels in their environment (Levine & McCloskey, 2009). Labels are strategically placed so that children are allowed to touch the labels, remove the labels, work with the labels, or add more labels, as they negotiate language with their peers and their teachers. Teachers of young dual language learners want children to notice that print is all around their classroom and that it symbolizes language. In addition, they want them to interact with the print. Literacy becomes an essential part of the early childhood classroom as children create and use labels and learn that those labels hold information (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013). Exposure to the classroom labels will help them think about print and understand how it works. Social interactions purposefully infused with academic and complex language

allow children to internalize and subsequently apply learned labels in a variety of contexts.

Labeling the Classroom: Where Should You Start?

Providing young dual language learners with many opportunities to “encounter and explore at least two to four new words each day” can enhance their oral language development and thus their early biliteracy development (Roskos, Tabors, & Lenhart, 2009, p. 1). For the early childhood teacher working with dual language learners, this means creating a print-rich bilingual classroom environment that has been purposefully labeled in two languages. Teacher starts the process by labeling common objects that children use on a daily basis. This includes labeling a variety of objects and the walls of the early childhood classroom in English and Spanish as seen in *Figure 1*. Young children understand and appreciate writing found in their classroom when it is meaningful to them and part of their social context. Providing a container with blank index cards, markers, and adhesive tape encourages children to contribute to the display of print throughout the classroom. Typically, early childhood teachers use 5x7 cards or cut sentence strips to a developmentally appropriate size for children to see. In addition, it is important to use conventional print on the labels so that young children start getting accustomed to the print they see on a daily basis in books and other contexts (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013). To make labels accessible they should be placed at children's eye level. This should also encourage them to use these words in their daily learning and daily writing.

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



As seen in *Figure 2*, the accessibility of the labels will encourage young dual language learners to remove them and take the label to wherever they are writing (Pinnell & Fountas, 2010; Schickedanz & Collins, 2013). Some teachers use clothespins, plastic sandwich bags, or Velcro to facilitate this interactive process for children. In other classrooms, children walk around with clipboards or spiral notebooks as they use the print around the classroom.

In addition, color-coding the print on the cards assists young dual language learners to distinguish between languages and to be able to read them accordingly (Gomez & Gomez, 2012). For example, some dual language teachers choose red for the Spanish word labels and blue for the English word labels (*Figure 1*). Other dual language teachers choose black for English because most teaching resources are already printed in black and then use another color for the native language (*Figure 3*). Because most young children are bound by perception, using different colors for each language is a practical way to remind young children of the language being used. It is also a practical approach to remind teachers to focus on the language of the day as children read the classroom labels. Moreover, it motivates young children to read because they see their language reflected in their environment. As seen in *Figure 4*, labels also facilitate the structure of the language used because the print on the labels is easily connected with the things found in their classroom (Nettles, 2006). These cues are particularly helpful for dual language learners because they help them visualize the variety of words found in the classroom. As children start making connections between word

labels and items, they will soon be “reading” words in their classroom independently. This encourages confidence and competence as they negotiate the classroom environment in the language of their choice (Santos, Cheatham, & Ostrosky, 2006). When these labels are used daily, young dual language learners will be learning to read and write this familiar text long before they recognize the words in a book (Beaty, 2013).

Labeling can also contribute to biliteracy development when the teacher walks around the room pointing to different labels and involves the children in reading the room. As this is done, early childhood teachers model reading from left to right and correct language usage. While labeling the classroom provides a better understanding of words for the young dual language learner, it also helps illustrate relationships to many items found within the classroom (Gunning, 2013). There are many items in the classroom such as computers, plants, or fish tanks that lend themselves to labeling their individual components. For example, *Figure 5* demonstrates a child placing English word labels on a Spanish poster indicating the parts of the human body. The teacher can discuss each part of the body and their function while children take turns playing “I Spy” or “Veó, Veó” while labeling additional sections.

Labels become more meaningful when based on the interests, lessons, or language needs of the students. When children are involved in the labeling of their classroom, it helps them establish literacy connections (Espinosa & Burns, 2003; Soderman, Gregory, & McCarty, 2005). Teachers can ask which five objects in the classroom should be labeled

Figure 4



Figure 5



for the week in English and in Spanish. They can also label their classroom environment based on the content-area being addressed. One teacher we observed used the following strategy after a science lesson on buoyancy. Ms. Flores took the opportunity to label the materials that her students used during the Spanish science lesson. They used

“baño de plástico”(plastic bathtub), “agua”(water), “aceite comestible”(oil), “canasta con objetos”(basket with objects), and two baskets, one labeled “flota”(floats) and the other “no flota”(doesn’t float). These visual prompts assisted students when they worked with the materials in the science-learning center as seen in *Figure 6*. The teacher then had

the children write the words on the labels. Through this interaction, the teacher modeled how to write and read the created labels. Children then walked around and placed the word labels on the objects or agreed upon resources.

Once the words on the labels have been mastered, the teacher and her students may take a classroom label walk to determine what other things can be labeled. As children's interests and skills increase, so will the classroom labels and signs. Many teachers begin by placing simple labels such as door, window, or shelf in their classroom. Gradually as students master those labels, these can be replaced with synonyms or more specific parts of the door (such as hinge). Consider how many times children make reference to the labels found in the classroom. Do they talk about the labels and use them in their daily writing activities? Furthermore, classroom labels will need to be changed as new materials are introduced to the classroom, new concepts are studied, or new projects are developed. It is important to assess the needs of the children so that they maintain interest in the print found around the classroom.

Labels: What Should I Label?

Labels may be placed in different places and on resources throughout the classroom to create a print-rich environment that stimulates reading and writing. While some labels such as "line starts here" or "Exit" may remain constant in the classroom, other labels may need to change in order to challenge dual language learners with new vocabulary. Some recommendations include the following: labels on learning centers and materials, labels on furniture, objects, supplies, work areas and

labels on bulletin boards, displayed student work, classroom job charts, calendar, journals, and other notebooks. Some teachers sort books in baskets and label them by genre or language: others label key areas or spaces in their room. By providing a print-rich classroom that includes labels, young dual language learners will understand that print carries meaning. In addition, it will encourage them to become more observant of their classroom environment. Moreover, it will establish a well-organized classroom that assists young

dual language learners to become independent learners.

Practical Activities Using Classroom Labels

Just like children's native language is a natural component that aides in developing biliteracy, so is learning through play. As children play in their label-enriched classroom, their understanding of language is enhanced as they use and practice their literacy skills. Teachers can integrate the use of bilingual classroom labels into their daily tasks through

Figure 6

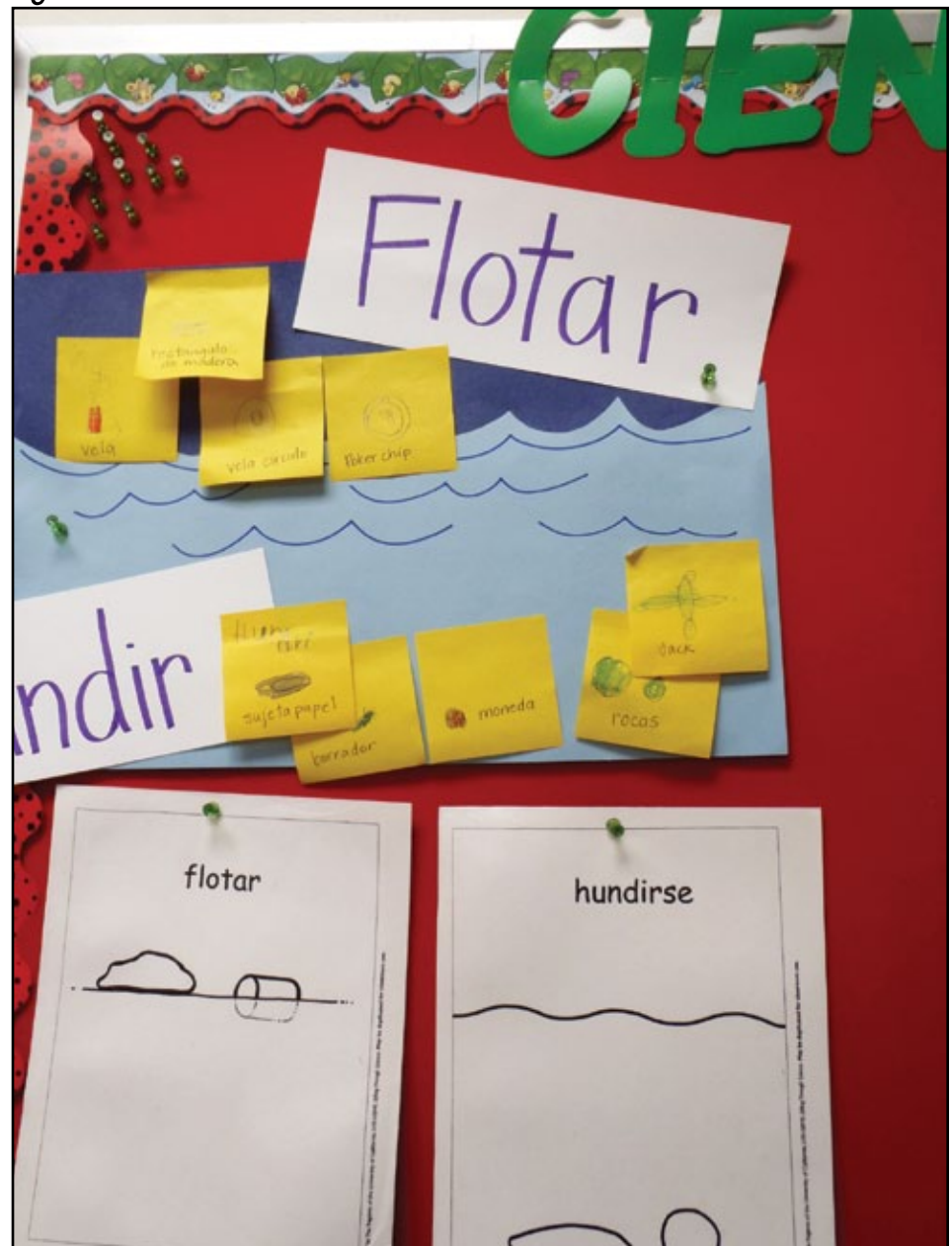


Table 1

Suggested Ideas for Using Labels that Surround the Classroom

Letter search through labels

- Find all the different types of letters; such as lower and upper case letters; find all the words that begin with the same letter; end with the same letter.

Hunt for labels

- Read all the words that rhyme with sock (children might say “clock”); words with the same initial sound as their name; words that are synonyms or antonyms of a called out word, words that have two vowels; labels that have _____ number of syllables; labels that have _____ number of consonants; etc.

Guessing games with labels

- Encourage children to guess a word found in the classroom that has the same amount of letters as their name or more letters than their name. For example: “I’m thinking of a word that has the same amount of letters as in María”. The responses could be “pluma”, “silla”, or “lápiz” depending on the labeled resources found in the classroom.

Label literacy walk in language of the day

- Provide children with a pointer (We like using a fly swatter.) and involve them in walking around the classroom and reading all the English labels on one day and Spanish labels on another day.

Alphabetizing the labels

- Allow children to get five words/labels from their classroom environment and take them to an area of their choice where they can manipulate the cards as they try to place them in alphabetical order.
- Give children a clipboard with paper and ask them to choose 5 words found in their classroom and write them in alphabetical order.

Graphing the labels

- Give children a paper with three columns that include the numbers two, four, and six. They will walk around the classroom and identify words with two, four, and six syllables. They will then graph their labels according to the size of the word.

“I Spy” word labels or “*Veó, Veó*”

- Give children magnifying glasses and encourage them to be detectives as they find word labels around the classroom environment that are described by the teacher or another student. For example: “I spy a three-dimensional model of the earth”; what is it? Children may respond, “Globe” (“*Veó, veó, un modelo tridimensional de la tierra*”; ¿*Qué es?* Children may respond “*Es un globo terráqueo*”).

“Using words you know”

- Challenge children to make new words from the words they already know from their classroom environment, such as “*Río*” in “*escritorio*” or “able” in “table”.

Adding adjectives to labels

- Encourage students to describe what has been labeled and to add adjectives to their label. For example, “the *squeaky* door”.

Placing Articles on labels

- Give children a collection of index cards with the Spanish articles “*el, la, los, las*” and some tape. Ask children to place the appropriate article before the Spanish nouns in order to indicate the gender, the number and its grammatical function. For example, “*el globo terráqueo*”

“Classroom of Silly Stories” or “*Salón de Cuentos Chistosos*”

- Ask half of the children to walk around their classroom and randomly choose five words. They will sit with a partner and create a silly story using the words chosen. For example, “Once upon a clock, there was a talking pencil, a walking chair and an enormous shelf in search of a classroom broom...”
- Keep in mind the diverse needs of your students when considering the number of words to play with as they create their silly stories.
- The stories can be shared orally or written on a paper.
- Children always have a good time as they start hearing each other’s stories!

a variety of interactive activities. This includes focusing on labels as students find and use materials, as they transition between lessons, as they help with classroom procedures, and/or during their morning routines (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013). As young dual language learners are given more opportunities to engage with the materials in their classroom, they start to feel more secure in the classroom environment and socially integrated. This type of environment that empowers young second language learners to see themselves as competent learners also facilitates the acquisition of their second language (Castro, Espinosa, et al., 2011; Tabor, 2008).

Playing with the variety of word labels found around the classroom should be a natural process for young dual language learners and is evident when they begin to invent games. For example, children emulate their teachers as they point to the labels around the room and ask each other to “find a word label that rhymes with bear”. As children explore their environment, you may hear them reading various word labels “bear, desk”, “bear, table” until they further explore their understanding of print and its functions and finally you hear them say “bear, chair; these words rhyme!” Providing children with opportunities to engage in playful activities allows them to understand how language works. Effective early childhood teachers set up and model playful activities that allow young dual language learners to explore and play with new words that contribute to their cognitive and linguistic development. Teachers should encourage young children to explore the labels found in the classroom. Although disguised as play, teachers will have a set of predeter-

mined objectives such as alphabet instruction, phonetic awareness, or decoding practice that young dual language learners will acquire as they are actively engaged with the classroom labels. These interactive label activities encourage academic exploration while enhancing young dual language learners’ vocabularies and concepts about print and writing.

Emergent literacy in any language involves the daily use of words (Beatty, 2013). Young dual language learners need to hear words, write words, and use words daily, to become literate. Some suggestions for helping young dual language learners capitalize on the word labels found in their print-rich environment are found in *Table 1*. These playful learning experiences, facilitate the understanding and usage of the words found in their classroom. At the same time, these activities offer play-based interactive alternatives to the increasing developmentally inappropriate expectations placed on young children’s literacy development (Klenk, 2001).

Conclusion

By using the wealth of labels found in their classroom environment, teachers can support biliteracy development through engaging, purposeful, and meaningful activities for young dual language learners. Labeling the classroom environment in two languages is not for decorative purposes but serves as a strategic tool for the acquisition of biliteracy. Thus, the classroom environment becomes an additional instructional resource that enriches language and biliteracy development for young dual language learners.

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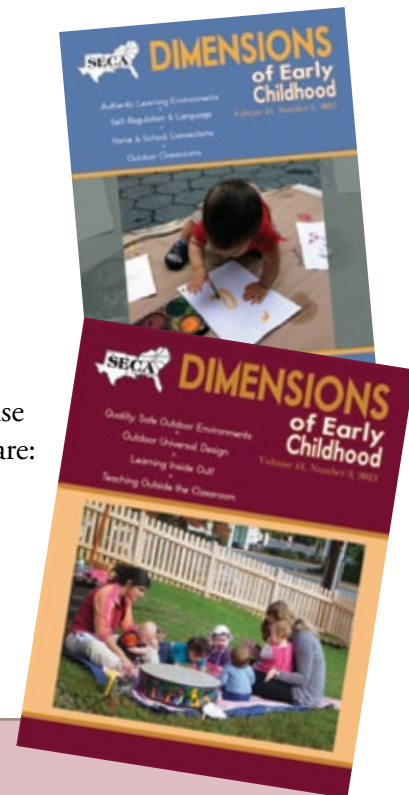
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