

# Creatively Encountering Languages in Caregiving and in the Early Childhood Classroom

by Piña Madera

## WHAT IF?

What would it be like in communities and classrooms if students started elementary school FLEX and FLES classes having been exposed to multiple languages during their preschool years? Maybe some teachers are lucky enough to have world languages introduced in preschool or to live in communities rich with language diversity. What if students came to their elementary FLES or FLEX classrooms having heard the language, comfortable with some basic phrases?

## WHAT IS KNOWN

For years, research has shown that language learning at an early age has great benefits. Most recently, a May 2015 study published in *Science Daily* suggests that exposure to multiple languages in childhood produces

better communicators (“Children exposed to multiple languages”). A 2014 study in Singapore showed that infants exposed to multiple languages showed increased behaviors that predict cognitive gains in preschool (“Benefits for Babies”). A 2012 post at the Dana Foundation is a rich resource and expounds “The Cognitive Benefits of Being Bilingual” (Marian and Shook).

Educators are aware of the research, which seems to be reported anew nearly weekly. Strong language skills provide children a foundation for all of their learn-

ing. Multilingualism, specifically, has been linked to improved focus, abstract thinking, task switching; and even health benefits like delayed Alzheimer’s, among others.

## CAREGIVERS NEED NOT BE BILINGUAL

Wouldn’t it be wonderful to give ALL children this strong start? Having a language expert in every early childhood classroom or home setting would be ideal, but is not always possible. Some savvy parents are providing children with bilingual caregivers early in life, but they are in the minority.

Caregivers and early childhood educators can get children started on their multilingual journey by adding exposure, fun, and by modeling an openness to new and different cultures.

Teachers and caregivers who specialize in teaching very young children (ages 0-6) can introduce languages to their students, regardless of their own language ability. Choosing to introduce multiple languages when the child is acquiring her first, offers a beautiful opportunity for both the fluent and non-fluent caregiver (and child!).

Fluent speakers have the advantage of being able to simply speak to children in the target language--the child could naturally acquire what is spoken to them if they hear it enough.

For non-fluent speakers, it requires some strategy and an openness to learning the language themselves. All young children begin by learning simple phrases through repetition: a perfect recipe that will simplify and support the caregiver’s own learning.

Of course, this requires getting support from native speaker friends, families, online, or elsewhere. There is no shortage of help online--find a native-speaker partner, search for activities and ideas to engage young learners in the target language, or find a good online dictionary that offers pronunciation of the target language. Google “Preschool (target language) activities.”

## CREATIVE STRATEGIES FOR CAREGIVERS AND TEACHERS

Where language immersion is not an option, here are some ways that any creative caregiver, parent, or educator can bring a little world language into their daily time with young children:

**1. Nouns are great for labeling, but NEEDS get people communicating.**

In early childhood classroom, it is common to see signs in multiple languages that label the sink, bookshelf, or other items. This is a great start and creates a welcoming space to families whose first language is not English. A slight shift in approach, in addition to these well-intentioned efforts, can go a long way in bringing children further in their bilingual journey.

Learning communicative phrases (both the question and the answer) will help children express their real needs, and can be woven into the planned activities, without need for additional time spent on language instruction. Phrases like these can easily be incorporated into a typical day: “Do you want \_\_\_? / I want \_\_\_.” or “Do you need \_\_\_? / I need \_\_\_.” The caregiver can choose a handful of vocabulary to fill in the blanks--drawing from what’s relevant to their specific engagement with the kids. For example, caregivers who serve orange slices every day might look up the word for orange.

## 2. Expand the language

Many programs offer colors and numbers as the language goal. Perhaps it’s best see this vocabulary as peripheral to real communication. If adults can speak simply about what children want or like or need, it becomes natural to then talk about those items, later adding descriptors like colors and quantity.

--Add numbers:

Count the items as they are learned.

A song that simply puts the numbers one through ten to music could be utilized throughout the day as teachers lead children in counting anything from bananas at snack time to chairs at the table to balls on the playground.

--Add colors:

Add the mention of color to describe items at hand (like the bananas, chairs and balls counted above).

--Add choice:

Once children have mastered those simple dialogues above, add choices. “Do you want milk or water? Do you want the ball or the bat?” A wonderful perk to this idea is that the child hears the answer in the questions! This is an easy way to introduce additional vocabulary once they’ve got the stem down (such as “Do you want \_\_\_?”).

## 3. Leverage the daily schedule, especially transitions

Any quality early education program meets children’s need for structure with a predictable schedule. This creates an excellent opportunity for world language learning. Transitions can harness the regularity of the schedule, and help teach simple structures. Write or find a chant or song to transition children to the next activity.

Here is a chant useful when talking about moving to another activity, like reading, playing, building, washing, eating, or resting. Clapping along to the syllables is optional, and adding a gesture to mimic the activity is encouraged!

*Let’s go,*

*let’s go,*

*let’s go read.*

Repeat the song until the kids have made the transition.

Beyond helping children move through transitions, by distracting and making a game of it, this is a sneaky grammar lesson they won’t know they’re learning! Here they begin to learn how the language is built (Let’s go + a verb = a sentence). They will begin to pick up on this pattern, noticing that the stem stays the same, and the verb (taught with a gesture) changes. This also brings a lightness to the transition, increases cooperation, and brings joy into the room.

## 4. Say it the same way every time!

Fluent speakers will naturally vary their phrases. This is great for an immersion model, where children are swimming in the target language. It is natural to call children to circle using phrases like: “Come to the circle.” “Join us.” “Let’s go to circle.” The more language, the better.

However, if immersion is not an option, and language is taught in chunks and phrases, children will benefit from hearing discreet, simple phrases, spoken the same each time. The natural variation mentioned above will slow down their process. Songs and chants are the best way to make this happen--commit to simple language, simple phrases, and keep them consistent. Choose a phrase, set it to a rhythm (clapping), or a tune, and rely on it to keep the language consistent.

## 5. Sing and move with the kids

Caregivers know that singing and mov-

ing is natural for young children, a joyful way to engage. Find songs to support the target language goals--simple songs about daily activities are ideal. Again, if children are not immersed in language, select vocabulary that they can use. Farm animals might be less relevant than food vocabulary. Add moves to engage the whole body and mind (for both adults and kids!)

## A CALL TO ACTION

You, as a language expert, can influence your community by sharing the data on early language acquisition. The benefits last a lifetime. Maybe you have considered offering services to a younger group, or maybe you have a child in a preschool setting. As educators committed to quality language instruction, what can be done to encourage exposure at even younger ages and give kids a stronger foundation in their bilingual/multilingual journey?

## WORKS CITED

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