

# Myths and Facts Regarding Second Language Acquisition in Early Childhood: Recommendations for Policymakers, Administrators, and Teachers

*Early childhood teachers, administrators, and policymakers play a key role in addressing the needs of young English Language Learners (ELLs). Identify common myths and misconceptions about second language acquisition in young children.*

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The typical classroom composition in the U.S. has changed in the last three decades, and the number of students in the U.S. public education system who are English Language Learners (ELLs) has doubled during this time. Currently, 20% of students are classified as a language minority (Huerta & Jackson, 2010). The shift is most pronounced in early childhood, and in some districts close to half of all kindergarteners are ELLs (Espinosa, 2013). Increasingly, the process of learning English takes place in an early childhood setting, and the early childhood classroom constitutes the first exposure to English for many children (McCabe et al., 2013).

Early childhood teachers play a key role in addressing the needs of young ELLs, and a vast body of research is dedicated to assessing best practices for teachers. However, less research addressing the role of policymakers, program directors and administrators is available. Although teachers can make a difference in the lives of children, their influence is often limited to their classrooms and many changes that need to take place at the policy or program level are beyond the teacher's control. Moreover, it is important for teachers to familiarize themselves with the best practices at the program and policy levels, as teachers can be instrumental in advocating, informing, and proposing changes at program and policy levels. They can also help dispel common myths and misconceptions regarding second language acquisition in young children.

## **Common Myths and Misconceptions about Second Language Acquisition in Early Childhood**

Until recently most policy and practice decisions about young ELLs in the U.S. have been made based on common beliefs and myths rather than research (Espinosa, 2013). The research regarding language acquisition rejects four of the most common myths and beliefs about L2 (second language) acquisition in early childhood.



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### Myth 1: Non-Native English Speaking Parents Should Speak English in the Home

In the U.S. there seems to be a common belief that parents should stop talking to their infants in their native language in order to prepare them for English interactions. When parents with limited English proficiency follow this frequent advice, they lose opportunities to support their children's language development as the parent has a limited vocabulary in English. In addition to missing the opportunity to learn the home language, children are not learning to use language from a fluent adult, and therefore, they do not experience great gains in English. When parents do not use the language in which they are most proficient, in some cases language development in general is put at risk (McCabe et al., 2013).

Children develop language optimally when parents talk to them in a language in which the parents are proficient and fluent (McCabe et al., 2013). Through language, parents socialize children and share cultural beliefs and values. By decreasing the use of the home language, parents might be sacrificing the sharing of their culture and traditions with their children. By prioritizing the use of the home language in early childhood, parents and professionals can prevent overall language delays that affect school readiness and academic achievement (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

### Myth 2: The Process of Acquiring a Second Language (L2) is the Same as for a First Language (L1) in Early Childhood

Although there are some similarities, there are several differences

among the processes of developing first and second languages. A child's goal for learning a first language (L1) is inherently different from the goal for learning a second language (L2). When acquiring a first language, a child is learning how to use language as a means to communicate with others. When learning a second language, a child is learning to communicate in a specific language in a specific context (Tabors, 2008). The process of understanding the function and use of language must be established in order to succeed at learning a particular language.

**Teachers can help dispel common myths and misconceptions.**

First, language acquisition is a universal developmental task of early childhood, but acquiring a second language is not. For this reason, first language development is relatively unproblematic for typically developing children, and individual characteristics play a small role. However, when learning a second language, individual characteristics play a much larger role (Tabors, 2008). One characteristic that plays an important role in second language acquisition is aptitude, as people vary greatly in their abilities to learn a second language. Additionally, social characteristics, such as sociability, confidence and shyness, and the degree of willingness to take risks in social situations play important roles (Tabors). Furthermore, motivation and an individual's favorable attitude towards the dominant language make a difference in the process of acquiring that language (McCabe et al., 2013).

### Myth 3: Acquiring a Second Language (L2) is Easy in Early Childhood

Acquiring a second language (L2) is a difficult task for both children and adults. Although early childhood is a prime time for a child to learn a language, the process of acquiring a second language is demanding and difficult (Tabors, 2008). Early childhood is a critical or sensitive period for the development of a first language, yet a second language can be undertaken at any age (Tabors). As with other forms of challenges, cognitive capacity and cognitive demand play an important role in this process, and in general, the older the child when facing a cognitive challenge, like learning to play chess, the easier it is for the child to learn this (Tabors). Thus, the idea that early childhood is a magical period for acquiring a second language is a myth, and the reality is that this process places a great demand on a child. The only component of second language acquisition with a critical period in early childhood is the development of a native accent (Tabors, 2008).

### Myth 4: Multilingual Children Lag Behind Peers in Academic and Language Skills

Research indicates that when children are reared in high quality multilingual environments, they experience cognitive, social, and economic benefits. For example, Leikin (2013) found that multilingual young children displayed higher levels of creativity and higher levels of creative mathematical problem solving than monolingual children. Similarly, researchers have consistently found that young multilingual children exhibit better executive functions, such as attention and memory, than

monolinguals (e.g., Kalashnikova & Mattock, 2014; Lauchlan, Parisi, & Fadda, 2013). Because they are accustomed to switching between languages, multilingual children and adults tend to be faster at switching between sets of rules and symbols. These skills give multilingual children advantages in self-control, problem-solving and decision making (Kuhl, 2011). Similarly, fluent bilingualism is associated with higher academic achievement in youth (McCabe et al., 2013) and better cognitive skills in old age (Gold, Johnson, & Powell, 2013).

Brain research demonstrates that multilingual children have greater brain tissue density in areas of the brain related to memory, language, and attention with even greater density levels for children exposed to a second language before the age of five (McCabe et al., 2013). Stocco, Yamaki, Natalenko, and Prat (2014) explain that multilingualism is associated with more flexibility in transferring information to the part of the brain called the prefrontal cortex, which plays a key role in executive functions. They propose that multilingualism “trains the brain” to improve its performance under conditions of competitive information selection.

## Recommendations

Myths and misconceptions perpetuate deficit perspectives regarding ELLs. Thus, we would like to suggest practical applications and recommendations for policymakers, program leaders, administrators, and teachers regarding appropriate practices to facilitate second language acquisition for young children. These recommendations lean on research that emphasizes the need for rich



Photo by Elisabeth Nichols

*Acquiring a second language is a difficult task for both children and adults.*

language environments to support language development.

### Recommendations for Policymakers

A key policy recommendation is to disseminate information to parents before their children enter formal schooling. The research presented emphasizes the importance of developing strong language skills by exposing children to the language in which parents feel most comfortable. For instance, some immigrant parents may not be familiar with the research, and by the time the children reach a center-based setting or formal schooling, they stop talking to children in their home language. One way of minimizing this risk is by reaching parents before it is too late. A policy that focuses on pediatric primary health care might be one that will help reach parents. Health care reaches populations difficult to reach otherwise, and on average children are required to have at least fifteen visits to their primary caregiver before entering kindergarten (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002). These visits can constitute an

ideal opportunity for the delivery of key information (McCabe et al., 2013).

Several of the policy decisions in the U.S. regarding ELLs have been made based on personal views and common knowledge. For example, it is common to think that individuals who spend time immersed in English-language speaking and listening will develop English-language skills faster. This idea endorses policies that promote second language immersion in early childhood settings, but research regarding immersion programs contradicts their advantages for young children. Young children have not yet mastered the elements of their first language and shifting to a new unfamiliar language during early childhood might negatively impact the development of language skills and academic achievement in English (Espinosa, 2013). Immersion differs significantly from simultaneous language acquisition unless this process starts at birth, when language development begins. Most children find themselves in an immersion setting after their first language is determined. One recommendation is for

policies and politicians to shift their views and promote more bilingual programs in early childhood settings, including those settings in the public education system such as state-funded prekindergarten and kindergarten programs. The advantages of bilingual education for all children are supported by research (e.g., Kalashnikova & Mattock, 2014; Lauchlan et al., 2013) and, many countries including Canada, Belgium, India, Hong Kong, and Singapore have embraced this approach.

Funding for policies that focus on early literacy helps to promote reading in homes where families may have difficulty obtaining books in their native language. One example of a successful policy initiative is the “New Mainer Book Project.” This project was a result of collaboration between the Maine Humanities Council and People’s Regional Opportunity Programs (PROP), a community action agency that serves one of the most diverse and populous counties in Maine. This project identified a large community of Sudanese refugees living in Portland, Maine, whose children were

in early childhood programs. This community was underrepresented in the children’s literature available (Sullivan, 2005). The project team met with several Sudanese refugee women and listened to their stories, fables, folktales, myths, and anecdotal accounts. The Maine Humanities Council appointed a noted children’s author to compile many of these stories into a book that reflects Sudanese experiences, tales, and values (Sullivan, 2005). The storybook was developed to be used in Maine’s early childhood programs (For more information, visit <http://mainehumanities.org/programs/btr-newmainers.html>).

Lastly, early childhood settings include programs for infants and toddlers, and some policy recommendations are specific for this age group. Home-based services such as early intervention and home-visitation are the most common approach to serving infants and toddlers with special needs or who are at risk. Yet, one barrier to home-visitation services for ELLs is that immigrant parents might not be aware of the availability of such services. One significant issue is the fear of participation in

such services due to the potential of being found to be undocumented (McCabe et al., 2013). This fear prevents families from obtaining services for their infants and toddlers to enhance their development and language skills. Making information available to immigrant parents regarding the availability of services regardless of immigration status should be considered a policy priority for ELL infants and toddlers. McCabe and colleagues suggest exposing parents to this information through the health system, at prenatal and postnatal visits, and through mass media.

### Recommendations for Early Childhood Program Leaders

Programs can better serve ELLs and their families by developing a program philosophy that describes the way the program will support quality experiences for children and their families whose first language is not English (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). Programs can help by describing how first language and second language acquisition will be supported, how languages will be used in the classrooms, and by providing this information in the parents’ home language. Since a rich language environment is central to language development, programs can provide professional development about the acquisition of first and second languages, combined with information about how to support home language acquisition and strengthen literacy skills at home (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). In addition, programs can assist teachers and children by acquiring children’s books in the many home languages represented in the program. Program leaders report that it is helpful to shop in international children book fairs.



Photo by Subjects and Predicates

*One teacher in the classroom should be familiar with the child’s first language.*

Similarly, programs can support parents and children by providing translations at parent meetings, conferences, trainings and other events and ensuring that ELL parents are involved in the process of program policy development (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). Providing all written communication to families in their home language or in their preferred language and having a process in place for families to communicate and give feedback in their home language will facilitate parental involvement.

Programs that support ELLs make an effort to bring the home language into the program as much as possible. One way programs can achieve this is by recruiting staff and teachers who are bilingual and by providing them with additional compensation. Similarly, programs can play a key role in assuring that staff meet the requirements for positions and by assisting potential teachers in documenting their qualifications, e.g., by getting transcripts from foreign universities and assessing their language proficiencies (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). When half the children in a classroom speak a specific language, programs can hire a teacher who speaks that specific language (Cruzado-Guerrero, 2005). This would also be beneficial for the other half of the students in a class who do not speak the specific language by naturally being exposed to a foreign language at a young age. One way programs can bring home languages to the classroom is by partnering with foreign language departments of local universities and asking for bilingual students to volunteer for a few days a week in a semester as part of course requirements (Sullivan, 2005).

These recommendations might be

more feasible in some areas of the country such as big metropolises with diverse populations than in other areas where it is hard to find qualified bilingual teachers. Nevertheless, given the increasing number of young ELLs in early childhood programs, it is important to make these recommendations widely known to program leaders and administrators so that some progress will be made in addressing needs of ELLs at the program level.

**Language acquisition for children can be influenced by adult fluency.**

Successful programs reach out to the community and collaborate with community members to best address their specific needs. One example of successful community collaboration at the program level is the Kawerak Head Start serving children in Nome, Alaska and in island villages in the Bering Straits. In many villages, due to outside pressure, children's use of their native tribal languages such as Inupiaq and Yupik was decreasing significantly. Parents were concerned about the preservation of their culture through language and about the children's psychological and identity development. In response, the program has developed a curriculum called *Sharing and Learning Place* which combines Native Alaskan culture and languages with early childhood practices. Throughout the curriculum children experience authentic activities such as weather, land, sky, and water explorations, animal be-

havior, ice fishing games, and basket making. Similarly, meaningful phrases in the native languages are used throughout the day (Ochanga, 2005). This is an example of a program's initiative to preserve language through curriculum.

Lastly, for infants and toddler programs, using the home language is a priority in order to provide language continuity and help infants and toddlers build their basic language skills (Wittmer & Petersen, 2010). Programs can actively recruit teachers who speak the children's first language. If this is not possible, they can make extensive efforts to ensure that the home language is represented in the program by partnering with universities and inviting volunteers.

Infants and toddlers with disabilities or considered at risk are usually served through home visitors. A key component of home-visitation programs is to build relationships of trust among staff and families (Quezada, Mukherjea, & Molina, 2005). Programs should make it a priority to ensure that home-visitors speak the child's home language to facilitate the connection between the home-visitor and the family and children. When the home-visitor can speak the home language, the services are proven to be more effective. When a home-visitor does not speak the home language, it is at least important to show respect and sensitivity to the family's beliefs and traditions (Quezada et al., 2005).

### Recommendations for Teachers

This article suggests recommendations for policymakers and administrators in order to support the work of teachers in the classrooms. As the number of young ELLs increases, teachers will need the support of program leaders and policies to best

serve young ELLs. Nevertheless, there are some recommendations that can be implemented by teachers to ensure a language rich environment for young ELLs particularly by preserving and respecting the child's first language.

Teachers play a key role in creating an inviting environment for families and in making sure that families, culture, and language are respected in the classroom. Not being able to communicate can make children and families anxious, so it is especially important to create strong relationships with families of young ELLs (Wolverton, 2005). It is advisable for teachers to bring the home language into the classroom as much as possible. This can be achieved by inviting family and community members to sing songs, read books, and share favorite activities or objects in their home language. Similar to the "New Mainers Book Project" described above, teachers can encourage families to create books in their home language for the class library.

Ideally, at least one teacher will be familiar with the children's first language (Plotka, Busch-Rossnagel, & Kim, 2015). However, when this is not the case, teachers can make an effort to learn a few key sentences and terms in children's first language (Plotka et al., 2015). Teachers can rely on Google translate (but should be cautious) or other sources to be able to use a few words in the children's first language. Other supportive practices are presented in Table 1.

Teachers of infants and toddlers can benefit from the recommendations provided. Yet, because infants and toddlers are at a critical or sensitive period of learning how to use language for the first time, providing language continuity is especially

**Table 1**

Children's developing skills	Teachers' supportive practices
Introduce and expand vocabulary and conversation	Observe children's interest in toys or activities and use to initiate conversations (McCabe et al., 2013)
Comprehension and vocabulary acquisition	Use gestures and nonverbal communication (Tabors & López, 2005)
Emerging conversation, including nonverbal efforts	Rely on questioning to acknowledge, support, and expand communication (Tabors & López, 2005)
Responding to questions	Allow sufficient time to formulate answers; accept nonverbal responses (smiles, nods, etc.)
Turn-taking in conversation	Model in verbal and nonverbal communication

helpful (Wittmer & Petersen, 2010). For this reason it is especially important for infants and toddlers that teachers incorporate first language into their daily routines. Teachers can implement this successfully by introducing music in first language and by asking family members to record their favorite songs so they can be played throughout the day (Plotka et al., 2015).

Lastly, teachers of infants and toddlers play a key role in encouraging parents to use the first language in the home by sharing information about the need for children to develop strong skills in first language in order to develop a second language, and the need for children to have rich communication with family members. Furthermore, teachers can inform parents about the advantages of multilingualism and help dispel the myth that multilingual children lag behind their peers in schools. Teachers of very young children can make a significant difference in young ELLs' lives by reversing the common trend of families stopping conversation in first language with

their children when they enter a formal program. This way, teachers have the potential to encourage families to preserve their first language and use it to expose children to high levels of language quality, quantity, and content, thus dispelling myths and misconceptions regarding second language acquisition.

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In Memory of

**Patricia Curry**

Dr. Pam Schiller

**Dan Curry**

Dr. Pam Schiller

**Bill Nalley**

Dr. Janie Humphries

**JoAnn Thornberry Haynes  
(mother of Terry Green)**

Dr. Milly Cowles

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