

Encouraging the Development and Achievement of Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood

BY LINDA M. ESPINOSA

As the population of children from birth to age 5 growing up with one or more languages other than English in the home continues to grow, and as many of these children participate in early care and education (ECE) programs, teachers and support staff will need to be prepared to work with dual language learners (DLLs)* and their families.¹ Most, if not all ECE educators, will need to understand the process of second language acquisition during these early years as well as the teaching competencies and effective practices that support the healthy development, learning, and achievement of DLLs.

- cognitive skills, such as executive functioning.
- Early exposure to a second language—before 3 years of age—is related to better language skills in the second language.
- The language development of DLLs often differs from that of monolingual children: DLLs may take longer to learn some aspects of language that differ between the two languages, and their level of English proficiency will reflect variations in the amount and quality of language input—but these differences are in most cases normal and not an indication of delay or disorder.
- The cognitive, cultural, and economic benefits of bilingualism¹ are tied to

- diverse words and sentence types. For most DLL families, this means they should continue to use their home language in everyday interactions, storytelling, songs, and book reading.
- There is wide variation in the language competency among DLLs that is due to multiple social and cultural factors, such as parents' immigration status and number of years in the United States, family socioeconomic status, and the amount of educational support for bilingualism.

These findings about second language acquisition during the early years, combined with research on high-quality ECE programs, have informed an emerging consensus on effective teaching of DLLs. An underlying principle is that they need both systematic exposure to English and ongoing support for home language maintenance and development.

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ECE Program Features

Recent research has identified certain ECE program features and instructional practices that promote school readiness and future success and help reduce the achievement gap between DLLs and their English-only peers at kindergarten entry. The National Academies' report emphasizes that ECE programs should intentionally use both languages—the child's home language and English—to promote high levels of proficiency in both, a characteristic that carries linguistic and cognitive advantages and is valuable in later school and life.

However, the practical implications of implementing a balanced approach to early bilingualism contain many challenges. While dual language program models that promote bilingualism and biliteracy are recommended, they are not always possible. Many programs serve multiple languages and employ few ECE teachers who are fluent in more than one language or are trained in cultural and linguistic diversity. In some cases, local policies and resources do not support a dual language approach. Consequently, in many programs, monolingual English-speaking ECE teachers must learn specific instructional practices and strategies that promote proficiency in both languages.

The findings of *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*,² published by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, include the following conclusions about young children and early bilingualism:

- All young children, if given adequate exposure to two languages, can acquire full competence in both languages.
- Early bilingualism confers benefits such as improved academic outcomes in school, and it enhances certain

high levels of competence, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing in both languages.

- DLLs should be supported in maintaining their home language in preschool and the early school years while they are learning English in order to achieve full proficiency in both languages.
- Continued development of the home language during the preschool years is critical to positive language transfer and facilitates the acquisition of English.
- DLLs' language development is enhanced when adults provide frequent, responsive, and varied language interactions that include a rich array of

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*For more on working with dual language learners, see "Dual Language Learners: Effective Instruction in Early Childhood" in the Summer 2013 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/summer2013/goldenberg_hicks_lit.

[†]For more on the benefits of bilingualism, see "Bilingual Education" in the Fall 2015 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/fall2015/goldenberg_wagner.



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comprehend lessons in English, develop advanced oral language skills, and progress in their English language development.

Effective ECE Instructional Practices

Young DLLs need additional scaffolds and supports to comprehend the meaning of lessons because they are simultaneously learning English and academic

to volunteer in the classroom to extend DLLs' opportunities to see, hear, speak, read, and practice their home language.

- Create visual displays that represent the languages, cultures, and family practices of the children enrolled in the classroom.
- Allow for frequent individual and small-group language learning experiences for DLLs.
- Provide books and materials that authentically represent the cultures and languages of the children and families.

Based on the research summarized above and the language needs of DLLs, the state of California, with the largest number and proportion of DLLs under 8 years of age, 60 percent,³ explicitly recommended two program approaches for DLLs in a recent report, *California Preschool Program Guidelines*:⁴ (1) balanced English and home language development, or what is commonly referred to as a dual language model, and (2) English language development with home language support. The first approach is intended to promote full bilingualism and biliteracy, while the second provides guidance on how all ECE teachers can support all languages represented in their classrooms.

In dual language programs, careful attention must be paid to the amount of exposure and quality of instruction in each language. There is evidence that if programs do not have a systematic division of time allocated to each language and do not frequently monitor the allocation of time, they often tend to become English-dominant. Possible methods of balancing class time between the two languages include, but are not limited to, programs that alternate time spent in each language (daily or weekly) and programs that alternate instructional time between ECE teachers who speak the home language and those who speak only English.

The second program approach, English language development with home language support, recognizes the limitations of many ECE programs to implement dual language classrooms, resulting in interactions and instruction that are provided primarily in English. In this approach, ECE teachers must learn specific instructional strategies that will help DLLs

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content. These additional supports can take the form of explicit bridging between the two languages using pictorial, visual, and/or multimedia cues to aid understanding; interactive and physical actions linked to meanings; direct instruction on important features of English, including vocabulary and phonics; using culturally familiar themes and materials; and working closely with families to promote the continued development of the home language. A variety of specific instructional strategies that have been linked to improved short- and long-term outcomes for DLLs are practical and within the range of what can be expected of all ECE teachers.

Based on a synthesis of research findings expanded upon in the National Academies' report, the following instructional strategies are ones that all teachers, even monolingual English-speaking teachers, can use to support the goals of home language maintenance and English language development:⁵

- Early in the school year, meet with parents to learn critical information about their child and family, especially about the child's early language experiences.
- Recruit parents, extended family members, or community representatives

Have students, parents, and other family and community members help you understand and read them.

- Have key vocabulary words introduced in the home language by parents or community volunteers.
- Systematically use cognates in the home language and English to explicitly make connections between the two languages.
- Use pictures, real-world objects, and concrete experiences to convey the meaning of words and concepts.
- Use visual cues and physical gestures and signals linked to specific content vocabulary to imprint meaning.
- Routinely assess each child's language and conceptual knowledge and skills.

While these specific strategies are not exhaustive and have not been rigorously evaluated, they are based on research to support language skills in the home language while also promoting English language development. The preponderance of the evidence suggests these are ways that educators in preschool classrooms can integrate and extend DLLs' knowledge, and ultimately help them learn English while also learning age-appropriate content.

(Endnotes on page 39)

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(Continued from page 11)

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(Continued from page 16)

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Oral Language

(Continued from page 23)

want to produce individuals who are thoughtful, engaged, and conscious of their own development.

English language learners bring valuable assets and immense potential to school. The role of educators is to realize that potential in deep and accelerated ways. Each classroom teacher must ensure the path to that development is paved with meaningful interactions to help students develop language skills, gain conceptual understanding, and learn academic content. Our students deserve no less. □

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