As the number of English learners in K–12 public schools has increased, so too has the population of preschool dual language learners, or DLLs. For preschoolers, the term dual language learners is preferred since young children are still in the midst of acquiring their first language.* More than 4 million DLLs are enrolled in early childhood programs nationally. Thirty percent of the children in Head Start and Early Head Start are DLLs.1

Although a large majority of preschool-age children in the United States attend some type of early education setting, Latino children and children of immigrants attend at a lower rate than do children of nonimmigrant parents.2 This is unfortunate, since children who attend preschool during the year before kindergarten have an advantage in reading and math over their peers who are not enrolled in center-based care.3 Many children who are learning English as a second language while they are gaining early proficiency in their home language are therefore disproportionately missing academic benefits that attending preschool provides.4

For those DLLs who do attend an early childhood care or education setting, early educators must be informed by what research has to say about creating optimal learning environments. Concern over the achievement of this population of students has led to a large number of recent research reviews and professional publications aimed at improving preschool DLLs’ educational opportunities.5 In

* For discussions of terms, see the CECER-DLL’s website at http://cecerdll.fpg.unc.edu and the NCEL’s glossary of terms at www.n cela.gwu.edu/files/rcd/BE021775/Glossary_of_Ter ms.pdf.
Spanish interactions with their teachers were more likely to engage in more complex linguistic interactions than children who experienced only English interactions with their teachers. Teachers in classrooms where Spanish was used also tended to rate their students more positively in terms of the students’ frustration tolerance, assertiveness, and peer social skills.

Teachers can also use the students’ home language in various ways that support children’s learning, even when instruction is essentially in English. For example, teachers could supplement a book they are reading aloud with explanations or brief clarifications in the home language or by pointing out a cognate (e.g., “Do you know what a market is? It sounds like mercado, right?”), which can make texts in English more accessible to DLLs and possibly make them aware of linkages across languages.

2. Comparing effective practices for DLLs and English speakers in English-only programs

Studies of effective early childhood curricula have shown cognitive and social benefits for DLLs that may be comparable to or greater than those for native English speakers. Researchers in Nebraska, for example, found that a professional development literacy workshop series (HeadsUp! Reading) for early childhood educators was equally effective in promoting early literacy skills for children from English-speaking and Spanish-speaking homes. In Oklahoma, one of the pioneers of universal high-quality pre-K education, preschools produce developmental gains across various demographic groups, including Latinos, approximately 70 percent of whom come from predominantly Spanish-speaking homes. Gains for these students (in English) were stronger than for students from English-speaking homes; this might be explained by the fact that the Spanish-speaking students began with far lower English levels than the English-speaking students.

Studies also illustrate the value for young DLLs of well-known elements of effective teaching, such as explaining vocabulary words encountered during reading and using them in different contexts. In other words, successful teaching and curricula seem to be successful for most children, suggesting that there is probably considerable overlap between what is effective practice for
Preschool educators should use children’s home language where possible and build bridges with families to support children’s learning.

succeeded in having early childhood educators add scaffolding strategies for DLLs into their core practices found that the improvements in child outcomes were limited to some phonological awareness measures.17

The key message is that what we know about effective instruction in general is the foundation of effective instruction for English learners of all ages. “Generic” effective instruction, however, is probably not sufficient to promote accelerated learning among ELs, although it is almost certainly a necessary base. While we have some intriguing clues about what else is needed to make programs effective for English learners (as described in the articles on pages 4 and 13 of this issue), there is little certainty about how to incorporate these supports into programs that optimize developmental outcomes for DLLs.

3. Promoting language development in English and the home language

Language development is, of course, a high priority in early childhood programs. English language development is critically important, but so is promoting development of the home language. Developing the home language is important in its own right and as a means of promoting other important cognitive and social outcomes.18

In her volume, One Child, Two Languages, dual language researcher Patton Tabors describes the sequence that most young verbally can be encouraged to build relationships through shared interests (e.g., working with a partner on a puzzle or dressing dolls) and through humor. Children can also be provided with the space and time both to act as spectators and to rehearse what they hear and want to repeat. Furthermore, models of pragmatically appropriate phrases—that is, appropriate to the particular situation in which the word or phrase is used—can be very useful for children who are just starting to “go public” with their new language.

As discussed in the article on page 13, explicit English language development instruction is also important. We know surprisingly little, however, about the relative effects, benefits, and disadvantages of different approaches to promoting English language development for DLLs in early childhood settings (or K–12 schools).

In early elementary settings, researchers20 have found that a separate block of English language development instruction during the school day was somewhat more effective than only integrating English language development into other instruction throughout the day, although there certainly should be English language learning opportunities throughout the day as well. There is also evidence in the preschool context for a separate block of language development in the home language: for Spanish-speaking children in an English-immersion preschool, researchers found that a 30-minute block of Spanish-language development led to significant gains in children’s oral proficiency in Spanish.21

Second-language instruction should provide an appropriate bal-
ance of opportunities for meaningful, authentic communication and for more organized instruction and specific feedback on the proper use of conventional forms.22

4. Involving families in supporting children’s language learning

Families play an important role in helping to make children’s preschool experiences successful. DLLs’ parents consistently show interest in their children’s education and are highly motivated to provide their support.23 Unfortunately, teachers often underestimate language-minority parents’ ability to help their children succeed in school.24 Most parents are responsive to focused and sensitive efforts to help them play an active role in supporting their children’s earliest school success. However, researchers have found variability on the impact of home intervention programs on children’s academic learning, perhaps due to the range of design and implementation features of various programs.

An important issue that parents and teachers ask about is whether parents of DLLs should use the home language with children exclusively or try to encourage more English use. Research and experience have established that children can learn more than one language, either simultaneously or sequentially, with no adverse effects.25 In fact, in addition to the social and cultural benefits, there are potential cognitive advantages to growing up bilingual.26 Yet many parents—and teachers—assume it is a sign of lower language ability to speak more than one language.27 Research—dual language learners, 2012).


22. William m. Saunders, Barbara r. Foorman, and coleen d. carlson, “Is a Separate Block of time for Core Reading Instruction?” in Improving Early Literacy Instruction for English Language Learners, ed. Harold k. Stevenson and rachel f. Wolery (Baltimore, MD: Paul Brookes, 2003), 183–228.


