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

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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.† 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.

DLLs need both systematic exposure to English and ongoing support for home language maintenance and development.

The findings of Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures, 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 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 bilingualism are tied to 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 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.

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.

†For more on the benefits of bilingualism, see “Bilingual Education” in the Fall 2015 issue of American Educator, available at www.aft.org/aee/fall2015/goldenberg_wagner.
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 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:

- 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 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.

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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.

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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.

Endnotes


45. Gersten et al., Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction, 6–7.


47. Kim and Vescia, “Three Reading-Intervention Teachers’ Identity Positioning.”


50. Baker et al., Teaching Academic Content and Literacy.


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Endnotes


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6. Aida Walqui and Leo van Lier, Scaffolding the Academic Success of Adolescent English Language Learners: A Pedagogy of Promise (San Francisco: WestEd, 2010).

7. Anthony DeFazio and Aida Walqui, Where Do You Want to Go Next? (San Francisco: WestEd, 2001), DVD.


10. For more on sentence frames, see Ellis, Instructed Second Language Acquisition.