

Dual Language Learners

Effective Instruction in Early Childhood



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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

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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 NCELA's glossary of terms at www.ncela.gwu.edu/files/rcd/BE021775/Glossary_of_Terms.pdf.

this article, we survey this growing body of research to help inform educators responsible for creating settings for our young DLLs.

We organize our review of the research by addressing four key topics:

1. Employing children's home language in the early childhood curriculum;
2. Comparing effective practices for DLLs and English speakers in English-only programs;
3. Promoting language development in English and the home language; and
4. Involving families in supporting children's language learning.

At best, instruction in the home language contributes to growth in both English and home language skills; at worst, there's no difference in English achievement but an advantage in home language achievement.

1. Employing children's home language in the early childhood curriculum

The debate over bilingual education has been the most controversial aspect of the education of English learners for more than a half century and continues to be politically charged.⁶ Bilingual education's basic premise is that students should be taught academic skills in their home language as they learn and acquire skills in English. According to this view, instruction in the home language strengthens the home language and creates a more solid foundation for cognitive and academic growth in English; moreover, promoting bilingual competence is valuable in its own right. Opponents of bilingual education argue that instruction in students' home language both delays English learners' entrance into the academic and social mainstream and depresses English achievement; bilingualism might be fine, but the school should focus on rapid and effective English learning. Others have also raised concerns about the resources required to fund bilingual programs and whether the benefits justify the costs.⁷

Preschool studies tend to find that at best, instruction in the home language contributes to growth in both English and home language skills; at worst, there is no difference in English achievement but an advantage in home language achievement.⁸ In addition to promoting bilingual language and literacy skills, utilization of the home language can also have psychological and social benefits that immersion in a second language cannot offer. One study⁹ found that Spanish-speaking children who experienced

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.¹⁰ 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;¹¹ 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.¹² 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

DLLs and for students already proficient in English.¹³

Regardless of their level of English development, young DLLs who are working to master the rudiments of English probably need additional supports to help them participate fully in classroom learning activities if the activities are in English. Although preschool DLLs benefit from explanations about the meaning of words (just as English speakers do), one study found that children who began with lower English scores learned fewer words than children with higher English scores.¹⁴ Pictures help DLL preschoolers with low levels of oral English learn story vocabulary (e.g., dentist, mouse, cap), suggesting that *visual representations*, not just *explanations*, provide these children with additional support for learning.¹⁵ Video resources also have proven useful.¹⁶

Attempts to incorporate additional supports such as these into comprehensive programs and curricula have had mixed success. For example, a professional development program that

children follow as they begin learning a second language in preschool.¹⁹ First, young children often attempt to use their home language. Then, when they realize their home language is not working in this context, they tend to become silent. DLLs listen and observe, gaining an understanding of the classroom language. Next, they begin to “go public,” testing out some new words and phrases. Finally, they begin to produce the new language, using phrases and then sentences.

Children may approach English learning differently, so this developmental sequence is not universal and invariant. But when teachers are aware of the general sequence, they have the opportunity to support DLLs most effectively. For example, it is important to be able to recognize and respond to children’s nonverbal requests and protests—a silent child has needs that must be met, and the teacher can couple meeting those needs with introducing new phrases. Additionally, children who are not yet communicating

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 common sense that speaking more English at home will promote higher levels of English proficiency for children. Correlational studies do tend to corroborate these intuitions; use of any language at home is positively associated with children's learning outcomes in that language and negatively associated with outcomes in the other language. But findings are mixed: one study²⁷ found that increased use of English by Spanish-speaking mothers did not accelerate English growth by children—but it did decelerate Spanish vocabulary growth.

Bilingual language development need not be a zero-sum game, and parents should be reassured that use of the home language will not undermine children's English language development. Continuing to speak the native language can also be important for other reasons in addition to the cognitive and linguistic benefits, such as maintaining cultural and family values and communication. In sum, although more research is needed in this area, current research suggests that preschool educators should use children's native language where possible, apply specific strategies for building English language skills, and build bridges with families to support children's learning. □

Endnotes

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