

The Bilingual Advantage

AN INTERVIEW WITH
DR. LINDA ESPINOSA



Dr. Linda Espinosa's recent research work has focused on dual language learning in early childhood education.

Linda M. Espinosa is currently a co-principal investigator for the *Getting on Track for Early School Success: Effective Teaching in Preschool Classrooms* project at the University of Chicago, and a former co-principal investigator for the Center for Early Care and Education Research–Dual Language Learners (CECER-DLL) at Frank Porter Graham CDI at the University of North Carolina. She is a Professor Emeritus of Early Childhood Education at the University of Missouri, Columbia and has served as the co-director of the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University and the Vice President at Bright Horizons Family Solutions.

Her recent research and policy work has focused on effective curriculum and assessment practices for young children from low-income families who are dual language learners. Dr. Espinosa also served on the Head Start National Reporting System (NRS) Technical Advisory Group as well as the Secretary's Advisory Committee

on Head Start Research and Evaluation and was recently appointed to the National Academies Committee on Fostering School Success for English Language Learners. She is the author of *Getting It Right for Young Children from Diverse Backgrounds: Applying Research to Improve Practice with a Focus on Dual Language Learners* (Pearson, 2015).

First of all, who are dual language learners? And why is it important for early childhood educators to understand their development?

Dual language learners (DLLs) are young children who speak and are learning a language other than English

in their homes while they are also learning English. These children are acquiring two or more languages simultaneously — from birth — or learning a second language while continuing to master their first language, which means they are both mastering the linguistic features of two languages while also learning important concepts in more than one language.

The growth of young dual language learners enrolled in our ECE (early childhood education) programs has tripled in the last several decades and, in some communities, it has grown almost 500 percent. More than 85 percent of Head Start and state prekindergarten programs serve young DLLs. In many communities, ECE programs serve children who represent multiple language backgrounds. One program I recently visited provided services to children from 12 different language backgrounds.

This rapid growth in the number of young DLLs means that most, if not all, ECE teachers need to be prepared to effectively teach children who are not native English speakers. Research has

confirmed the importance of the early childhood years for all future learning and development, especially for children from low socioeconomic status and nonnative-English-speaking households.

New scientific evidence shows that the early childhood years are the ideal time to learn additional languages.

Additionally, we know that DLLs often start kindergarten with weaker school readiness skills and struggle academically throughout their schooling. Therefore, it is urgent that young DLLs receive the highest quality early care and education that supports their school readiness and long-term academic and life success. To

be effective teachers of young DLLs, early childhood educators at all levels need to understand the developmental patterns and linguistic strengths and needs of children who are learning through more than one language.

One thing that brain research has demonstrated is a “critical period” for language development — it’s important for children to learn language at a young age. Why is it especially important to children who are learning more than one language?

Good question. There is current and compelling scientific evidence that all young DLLs, even those with special needs, are quite capable of learning multiple languages during the early childhood years. In fact, the data show that all children benefit socially, linguistically, and cognitively from the

language-processing skills inherent in acquiring two or more languages during the early childhood years.

The new scientific evidence also shows that the early childhood years are the ideal time to learn additional languages. In fact, the human brain is poised to learn language from birth, or even in utero! Very young children have the capacity and, indeed, are neurologically prepared to learn more than one language — and they gain cognitively from managing the linguistic processing required when becoming bilingual. The most amazing aspect of learning more than one language during the earliest years is the very rapid language learning that occurs during the first year of

Recent brain research demonstrates that very young children have the brain capacity to learn more than one language.





Children develop a strong sense of identity when they retain their home language.

life. From the moment of birth, babies are attuned to the sounds of all languages, and this auditory perceptual ability gradually declines starting at about 7–8 months. This is why it is often difficult for adolescents and adults to learn a new language after about 12 years of age.

Many parents, on the flip side, are reluctant to expose their children to a second language because they fear it will affect their English vocabulary and general cognition in negative ways. Is this a myth? What would you tell these parents?

Yes, this is a myth. Parents should understand that their children, indeed all children, are capable of learning multiple languages, and in fact experience many cognitive, linguistic, and social advantages when they have systematic exposure to more than one language. Bilingualism is an asset that should be encouraged by families and educators. In addition, strong skills in the home or first language help promote the acquisition of English. So, parents should be encouraged to continue to speak to, sing with, read to, and interact with

their children in their home language. Language begets language, and all languages contribute to cognitive growth.

Further, parents should be aware that there are cultural and social advantages to maintaining their home language. When young children continue to develop their home language while also acquiring English, they build a stronger sense of identity and connection to their family’s cultural traditions and values. These psychological strengths then help older students navigate the challenging adolescent years.

But isn’t it important for young children to focus on the language of the classroom, which, in most cases in the US, is English?

Yes, of course, all young children, and especially DLLs, need to become proficient in English. You are correct that in most ECE classrooms English is the language of instruction and few programs have the capacity to offer instruction in multiple languages. Recent research has shown that preschool DLLs

Strong skills in the home or first language help promote the acquisition of English.

experience rapid growth in English when they attend classrooms that have extensive and targeted English language development opportunities.

However, an explicit focus on English acquisition should not come at the expense of continuing support for home language development. Frequently, when very young children are exposed to English for significant amounts of time, they shift their dominant language to English. DLLs who attend English-dominant ECE programs often quickly start to demonstrate a preference for using English and become disinclined to continue to use their home language in preschool and in the home. This out-



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Family participation in lessons in the home language enhances the language learning of dual language learners.

come has been discussed by researchers as first language loss, or a subtractive language experience. In many ECE settings, young DLLs show first language loss as they become more proficient in English.

Thus, while recent research has shown that it is possible and beneficial for young DLLs to learn English, English language development should not come at the expense of continued first language development. Research highlights the importance of sufficient exposure to both languages in order to reap the benefits of becoming bilingual. Fortunately, there are many strategies that all ECE teachers — even English-speaking monolingual teachers — can learn that will help young DLLs become proficient in English while also maintaining their home language.

And still, the dual language learner is doing something more than learning two languages simultaneously. DLLs are required to switch back and forth, and that context is important in understanding how development differs for monolingual and bilingual students. How might ECE providers use that knowledge to better design programs to be responsive to DLLs' needs and emerging potentials?

The ongoing challenges of processing more than one language and frequently switching between languages result in a different set of language and cognitive strengths and needs than those of monolinguals. Young children who are learning through two languages ini-

It is important to remember that differences in DLLs' language skills are just that — differences and not delays!

tially make slower progress in each of their languages than monolinguals. In addition, they typically have smaller vocabularies in each of their languages than monolinguals, but their total vocabulary size — the sum of what children know in both their languages — is frequently similar to monolinguals. Young DLLs also take longer to recall words from memory and have lower scores on verbal fluency tasks, as their language processing is more complex than that of monolinguals. Most often these differences are temporary and disappear as

young DLLs become more proficient in both of their languages.

These are some of the more salient and well-documented differences between DLLs and monolinguals; however, it is clear that the experience of being systematically exposed to more than one language during the early years will influence many aspects of cognitive and linguistic development. It is important to remember that these documented differences in the language and early literacy skills of young DLLs are just that — *differences and not delays!* They are a by-product of the challenges of hearing, processing, and making meaning from multiple language systems during the early childhood years.

It is possible for all ECE educators to enhance the language learning of DLLs by adapting instruction to incorporate the home language and employing specific strategies that promote English language development. Some of these strategies include active engagement of family and community members to present and support lessons in the home language, making sure there are materials in each language, and incorporating stories and content that are culturally familiar to the children.

This approach of systematically promoting the acquisition of English during the early years while also attending to the maintenance of a child's first language is often described as an *additive* approach to second language acquisition. In this approach, English is not thought of as a replacement of the home language, but as an addition to a primary language that is important for DLLs' overall development and future success.

The research described previously fully supports an additive approach — almost all young children are capable of *adding* a second or third language during the preschool years and this multilingual ability confers long-term cognitive, cultural, and economic advantages. Finally, as mentioned earlier, the first six years of life are an ideal time for children to acquire a second language, as it is the critical period for language development; it is the period when all

young children are actively attending to the sounds, grammar, and meanings of language. Thus, there are many compelling reasons to give young DLLs

A preschooler's multilingual ability gives that child long-term cognitive, cultural, and economic advantages.

opportunities to develop high levels of proficiency in both of their languages, because the advantages are significant and lifelong.

Should dual language learning occur in all classrooms? What benefits does it have for children who speak only English at home?

Ideally, all children should have the opportunity to learn more than one language during the preschool years. However, most programs do not have the capacity to provide comprehensive bilingual approaches. I have noticed an increase in the number of preschools that offer foreign language instruction as knowledge of the bilingual advantages becomes more widely understood — which is a good thing. I would caution these programs to remember that in order to experience the cognitive bene-

fits of early bilingualism, children need to develop sufficient proficiency in both languages and 15–30 minutes a day of exposure to a second language is not sufficient. I would also remind ECE educators that young DLLs have no choice. They have a first language that is not English and they must learn English to be successful in US schools, thus they are and will always be dual language learners.

What are the advantages of bilingualism, though? And, short of dual language immersion in all classrooms, what are some of the ways we can leverage these advantages to promote school success?

Research indicates that all children are not only capable of learning a second language, but would benefit from the mental flexibility and enhanced executive function inherent in dual language learning.





Encouraging parental involvement on field trips is one way for early childhood educators to develop relationships with their children's families.

Recent scientific studies have found that bilingual infants as young as seven months of age demonstrate superior mental flexibility when presented with shifting learning tasks; when compared to monolinguals, bilinguals were able to quickly respond to a switch in learning conditions and change their responses. Many of the studies of this bilingual advantage have focused on infants' ability to process and discriminate different speech sounds, which suggests that young bilinguals may have enhanced attention during speech processing. This

particular skill, the ability to inhibit previous learning when conditions change, is usually considered one aspect of executive functioning and is an essential component of school readiness.

Early bilingualism has also been associated with other aspects of executive function abilities, for example, working memory, inhibitory control, attention to relevant (versus irrelevant) task cues, as well as improved language skills.

How can we ensure that early education programs are staffed by teachers who can support DLLs?

This is a very challenging goal. Most ECE staff have not been trained in the approaches described here, and these topics are not covered in any depth in teacher preparation programs. The good news is that we now have many more well-designed in-service training opportunities on best practices for young DLLs. There is also an increased awareness of the importance of specific preparation and support needed to effectively teach young DLLs. I would recommend that all ECE providers review their current strengths and professional needs in this area.

What are some ways that teachers can promote a climate of diversity in the classroom that respects the individual cultures, languages, and experiences that are represented?

I think the first thing ECE teachers need to do is get to know the families

and children they serve. This is best accomplished when teachers take the time early in the year to sit down and have an in-depth conversation with families. During this initial session, teachers can ask families about the languages they speak, their cultural practices, their preferences for language usage, their hobbies or special interests, as well as their availability for volunteering. When educators show an interest in and communicate respect for families' language and culture, they begin the process of establishing a collaborative relationship.

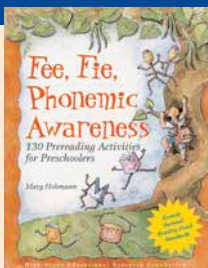
Next, it will be important to include examples of the children's families and backgrounds throughout their classroom. Having representations of home language print, culturally familiar literature, pictures of family traditions, and

To promote a climate of diversity in the classroom, early childhood educators need to know the families and teachers they serve.

culturally representative materials that can be found in local communities helps to bring home culture into classrooms. Parents can be tremendous resources in setting up the environment by bringing in materials from home and helping with the non-English print and family pictures.

Also, by learning a few key words and phrases from each child's home language, ECE teachers communicate a respect for and willingness to learn from families. It is easy and fun to learn phrases like *good morning, please, thank you, bathroom*, and so forth, in multiple languages. Parents, and the children themselves, can help you master the pronunciation of specific words. ■

ReSource editor Adam Robson conducted this interview.



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