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Working With Young English Language Learners: Some Considerations

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In today's preschool programs and primary school classrooms, teachers are working with an increasingly diverse population of young students, including many who come from homes where English is not spoken. According to Kindler (2002), English language learners (ELLs) now represent 9.6% of all students enrolled in public pre-kindergarten through Grade 12 classes in the United States; 67% of these students are enrolled at the elementary school level. The growth in enrollment of English language learners is not restricted to big cities and urban areas; in fact, states with large rural areas, such as Georgia, Montana, and Mississippi, have experienced sharp increases in the enrollment of ELLs in their public schools. Teachers in preschool and primary education programs all over the country may have English language learners in their classrooms. Unfortunately, many teachers are not provided with specialized training in how to meet the needs of ELLs (Menken & Atunez, 2001) and may have no prior experience in teaching young students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds.

This Digest provides general information on the characteristics of English language learners in U.S. preschool and primary school programs and describes learning conditions and instructional practices that are most effective for educating young ELLs.

Characteristics of Young ELLs

There are some important characteristics of young English language learners that may be useful for educators to keep in mind.

Young children's first language is not yet fully developed

As Chomsky (1969) demonstrated, children between 5 and 10 years old are still acquiring the structures of their first language. For children younger than 5, many aspects of their first language have not yet fully developed. So while older learners have the foundation of a fully developed first language when they begin acquiring a new language, younger English language learners are working toward two milestones at the same time: the full development of their native language and the acquisition of English.

While children are perfectly capable of acquiring two or more languages, and there is no evidence that this process produces any negative consequences—in fact, in many parts of the world it is the norm, rather than the exception, for children to grow up bilingual or multilingual (De Houwer, 1999)—educators must keep in mind that young children do not have a fully developed native language on which to base the learning of a second. Children may not know certain vocabulary words, grammatical structures, or other language features in their native language before they learn them in English, in which case merely translating a word or phrase may be of little help to them.

Children need to develop their native language(s) along with English

Educators must consider that young English language learners' primary mode of communication with their parents, extended families, and community members is their native language. Children are socialized into their communities, learn how to interact in socially appropriate ways, and receive nurturing and develop self-esteem through interactions with their parents and families. In order to develop their native language skills fully, young English language learners need support in both their native language and English. Ideally, those who work with young ELLs should be able to speak the native language(s) of the children. However, because many classrooms include children who speak a variety of languages and because bilingual teachers are not always available, this support may need to be provided by bilingual paraprofessionals or by parent and community volunteers. Children should be provided with opportunities for meaningful interaction in both languages, including verbal interaction and engagement with printed materials such as books and other media. In as many ways as possible, programs for young ELLs should support children's native languages.

Learning Conditions That Support Young ELLs

Learning English as an additive process

Preschool and elementary programs for English language learners should build on the premise that children's native languages are a valuable asset to be fostered. This kind of nurturing environment is critical to children's social and emotional development and fosters strong family connections as well as children's continued participation in the community. By collaborating with parents and others in the community, teachers can extend this nurturing environment into the school. Collaborations may include use of parent and community volunteers in the classroom to provide native language support to children, special classes or workshops to raise parents' awareness of the importance of supporting children's native languages at home, or family literacy programs that give parents and children the opportunity to learn together. Collaborations such as these, which promote native language development, help to ensure that children will continue to be able to communicate with their parents and extended families.

By valuing young English language learners' native languages and ensuring that learning English is an additive process—not one that results in the loss of the native language—programs can provide a nurturing, supportive environment for children, which can lead to improved self-esteem and help foster positive relationships with parents and communities.

Involving parents

Because parents are their children's primary teachers, it is essential for programs that serve young ELLs to build collaboration between parents and teachers. To this end, parents of young ELLs should be given frequent opportunities to provide input into their children's education. Teachers should share information with parents about the standards, curriculum, and instructional methods that are used in their child's class and help parents understand the results of various placement and achievement assessment measures that are used in the classroom. As Nissani (1990) points out, "the home and school should ideally work effectively together and support one another in the job of nurturing and educating young children" (p. 6).

The Nature and Quality of Instruction for Young ELLs

Ensuring teacher quality

It is essential to have well-prepared, qualified teachers in preschool and primary school programs that include English language learners. As Echevarria (1998) points out, teachers of young ELLs need to be able to understand their linguistic and other needs, prepare effective lessons that will meet those needs, provide appropriate instruction, and be able to assess how well students are comprehending what has been taught. Beyond that, teachers need a thorough understanding

of child development and how this may be applied to developmentally appropriate instructional design, sensitivity to the cultural backgrounds of the children and their parents, and skill in promoting positive home-school relationships.

Providing ample opportunities for planning

However well prepared and experienced an individual teacher may be in working with young English language learners, providing high-quality instruction and programming requires teamwork. Quality programs that serve young ELLs should involve extensive coordination and planning among staff. Too often, the planning time provided to teachers of English language learners is inadequate. In order to coordinate goals, align curricula, and ensure positive transitions for ELLs as they move through a program, adequate time for planning—including long-range planning that considers child development—is essential. When they are given sufficient time for collaboration and planning, teachers and others in programs that serve young ELLs may ensure that the instruction and goals they develop for these children are part of a well-articulated framework based upon practices that are developmentally appropriate, with long-term goals and achievement in mind.

Designing developmentally appropriate instruction

The kind of planning that teachers of young ELLs should be engaging in involves developmentally appropriate practice that takes into account the cognitive and social needs of young children. What Greenburg (1990) calls the cognitive/developmental approach is generally considered to be the most effective, as it considers what children may be able to do at various stages of development. This approach involves different types of learning, such as social learning, physical learning and play, emotional learning, and intellectual and academic learning. Nissani (1990) summarizes this approach as one in which "children are encouraged to become involved in purposeful and creative activities with other children; to make major choices among hands-on learning activities; to initiate and accomplish self-motivated tasks in a rich environment; and to construct knowledge at their own individual pace by discovering and engaging in open-ended activities that reflect all areas of their development" (p. 3). This kind of approach tends to be highly student centered and keeps children's developmental needs in mind by allowing them to learn at their own pace and in their own learning styles. It involves a great deal of creativity on the part of the teacher, who continually develops ways for children to interact in hands-on tasks and activities in which they may construct their own meaning through interaction.

Using funds of knowledge

In addition, teachers of young ELLs should tap into the funds of knowledge that parents and families possess and use this knowledge as a basis for instruction. For example, teachers should find out what kind of literacy practices, such as storytelling, are typically used in children's homes; what topics and subjects the child and family enjoy discussing together; traditions that are observed; and other areas of interest that may be brought into the classroom so that the knowledge base of children's families is respected and valued. Gathering this information can be done in a variety of ways, including informal discussions between teachers and parents, eliciting information from the learners themselves, visiting children's homes, and enlisting the help of community volunteers who may be familiar with children's home cultures. Once teachers have identified the kinds of knowledge, literacy practices, and traditions that exist in children's homes, this information may be integrated into classroom instruction (e.g., designing thematic units that include topics that children are familiar with, utilizing literacy practices that families employ in the home).

Within the context of supportive teachers who value students' home languages and native cultures and who actively involve students' parents in the instructional process, classrooms that utilize the cognitive/developmental approach provide young English language learners an enriching environment where they may construct knowledge—including knowledge of English—at their own pace and in a way that builds on their strengths. In this way, children's self-esteem is nurtured, and children are valued as individuals who are capable and full of potential.

Conclusion

As young ELLs enroll in preschool and primary school programs in record numbers, educators must continually strive to provide effective, nurturing environments and developmentally and linguistically appropriate instruction for all learners. This instruction should take into consideration the characteristics of young English language learners and their language development, the learning conditions that are most effective for these learners, and the kinds of instruction that best meet their needs.

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What Early Childhood Teachers Need to Know About Language

Considerable evidence exists that high-quality early childhood education programs for children from birth to age five can have long-lasting, positive consequences for children's success in school and later in life, especially for children from low-income families (Barnett, 1995; Frede, 1995). However, such programs are not available for all children who need them, nor are all programs of the quality that is necessary to achieve positive outcomes for children. In fact, only about 15% of child care centers are judged to be good or excellent. A recent study of a random sample of Head Start programs found that, while none of the programs was poor, the level of quality varied, and support for language and literacy learning was weak in many programs. Not surprisingly, children in the better quality programs out-performed children in lower quality programs on measures of learning and development (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1998). Overall, Head Start children's expressive language skills were below national norms, but in the better quality programs, children's scores approached or matched those of their middle-class counterparts.

Recently, the U.S. Department of Education released a study of the skills and knowledge of a nationally representative cohort of children at entrance to kindergarten showing that social class and other group differences are already evident this early (West, Denton, & Germino-Hauskin, 2000). This finding suggests that kindergarten is too late to intervene in order to narrow the achievement gap. High-quality early childhood education programs have great potential for preventing later school failure, particularly if they place a strong emphasis on language development. For this reason, early childhood teachers need thorough knowledge about language and how to help children develop language and literacy skills. Often teachers haven't had opportunities to build the knowledge they need.

Early Childhood Education in Context

Early childhood programs operate in a variety of public and private settings under a range of state standards, all of which are minimal. Unlike the K-12 educational system, in which certified teachers with baccalaureate degrees are the norm, early childhood programs are often staffed by teachers with minimal qualifications.

The context of early childhood teacher preparation varies greatly depending on state licensing standards for teachers. It is only within the last decade that the majority of states have had specialized licensure for early childhood teachers (Ratcliff, Cruz, & McCarthy, 1999). A number of states have an early childhood license that begins at kindergarten, which means that there is no baccalaureate-level preparation specific to serving children ages birth through four. Many child care teachers attend associate-degree-granting institutions that offer majors in early childhood, but these programs do not provide the depth and breadth of language preparation that Fillmore and Snow (2000) call for in their article, "What Teachers Need to Know About Language."

The most significant barrier to ensuring that early childhood teachers have a broad and deep knowledge of language is the inferior compensation offered in most programs. Currently, teachers in programs for young children receive average salaries that are less than half of those of public school teachers (Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Team, 1995). This lack of adequate compensation leads to high staff turnover, making it impossible to recruit and retain well-qualified, well-educated teachers.

A further complicating factor for early childhood programs is that they are now being brought into the standards and accountability movement that has had a major impact on K-12 education. States are adding prekindergarten standards and assessments, and Head Start is incorporating child outcome data as part of its evaluation and accountability systems. Very young children, including children whose home language is not English, are expected to demonstrate specific progress on identified learning outcomes, which always include language and early literacy objectives.

Why Do Early Childhood Teachers Need to Know More About Language?

Fillmore and Snow identify five teacher roles that are relevant to working with young children: communicator, evaluator, educator, educated human being, and agent of socialization. Some of these roles are particularly critical for language learning because the early years are the foundation for what occurs later.

Communicator. The role of conversational partner is especially important in the preschool years when children are just beginning to acquire language. Young children develop their language skills through interactions with more accomplished speakers of the language, such as parents, family members, and teachers, as well as other children. When children are served in groups, the teacher's role as interlocutor is very complex. Often children whose language is more advanced are spoken to more often by adults. Thus children whose language development is lagging receive less language interaction than they need, and those who need less actually get more.

Although most early childhood teacher preparation programs address language development, little emphasis is given to the role of experience and learning, especially within the social and cultural context. Because this dimension of language acquisition is overlooked, many teachers do not know how to support children's language learning at various levels of development nor recognize when language development does not proceed as expected. Early childhood teachers need to talk with children in ways that ensure that their language continues to develop, their vocabulary increases, and their grammar becomes more complex.

Evaluator. More and more, early childhood teachers are thrust into the role of evaluators of children's language. This has always been a difficult role, because it involves attempting to identify children who may have developmental delays or disabilities. When young children are in the early stages of acquiring language, it is especially difficult to obtain valid and reliable data on their capabilities. Is performance variance attributable to normal, individual variation in rates of development, to experiential variation that is relatively easy to remediate, or to an actual delay? For teachers of students who speak a language other

than English at home or who speak a vernacular dialect of English, this role is even more complex.

Educator and educated human being. Teachers of young children need to be generalists in their knowledge of the world, because children are interested in just about everything that goes on around them. This does not mean that early childhood teachers must have every fact at their disposal, but it does mean that they need to have the extended vocabulary, curiosity, and skills to find out what they want to know.

Agent of socialization. By school entrance, the processes of socialization and language development are well under way. When children are served in programs outside of the home beginning as babies, toddlers, and preschoolers, socialization occurs simultaneously in two environments. It is especially important to respect students' home languages and cultures.

What Should the Early Childhood Classroom Teacher Know?

Although oral language development is a primary goal in early childhood programs, learning experiences and teaching strategies do not always support this goal. Layzer, Goodson, and Moss (1993) report on a study of the experiences of four-year-old children from low-income families in three types of preschool programs—Head Start, Chapter 1-funded prekindergartens, and child care centers. Acceptable levels of quality were maintained in all program types, and a wide variety of activities was generally available. However, some findings caused concern. For example, more than 25% of the classrooms did not have a story time, either for the whole group or for smaller groups. In addition, while teachers spent about two thirds of their time involved with children, only 10% of their time was spent in individual interaction. In fact, more than 30% of children across all classrooms had no individual interaction with a teacher. And in a study of language development at home, Hart and Risley (1995) found significant differences among social class groups in both quantity and quality of children's early language experience.

Early childhood teachers need to know the value of one-to-one, extended, cognitively challenging conversations and how to engage in such communication, even with reluctant talkers. They need to know how the lexicon is acquired and what instructional practices support vocabulary acquisition. They also need to know how to conduct story reading and other early literacy experiences that promote phonological awareness and prepare children for later success in reading (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Children also need time for social interaction and play with peers, which provide excellent opportunities for language acquisition. But here again, the potential of the early childhood context is unrealized. Opportunity for peer interaction may be insufficient because young children are perceived to need more instruction. Early childhood programs are often economically segregated so that children who need them most often lack peer models of school-sanctioned language. In addition, children who are acquiring English as a second language need to interact with native-speaker peers, but often they do not because they are served within their own language community and the teacher is the only one who speaks English.

Fillmore and Snow (2000) also address important issues pertaining to written language. One topic that they do not address in detail is phonics instruction and its relationship to precursors in phonological and phonemic awareness. Because phonics instruction has been so politically controversial, these are topics that childhood teachers need to know more about, including appropriate ways for teaching young children. Most early childhood teachers do not have sufficient training in how to support early literacy learning. They need to know how much phonics children need to know, how to know which children need more or less explicit phonics instruction, and when to stop teaching phonics to which children.

Early childhood teachers should also have an understanding of cultural and linguistic diversity, and of learning and teaching that addresses the youngest age, including children who have not yet acquired a foundation in their home language.

Conclusion

Early childhood educators face tremendous challenges in supporting children's language development. Given that children acquire language best in meaningful contexts, through conversational interactions, and through encounters with written language, these must be the focus of instruction for teacher candidates.

Knowing what teachers need to know about language demands that the issue of teacher qualifications in early childhood education be addressed. Teachers of young children must obtain more education, better compensation, and greater respect. Their role in supporting children's language acquisition is the bare minimum of what they have to contribute to children's well-being and future potential.

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Taken from ELL Teacher Newsletter

Questions Many Parents Have....

Question:

Is it OK to speak to my child in my native language?

Answer:

Talking to your child regularly lays the foundation for her language and literacy development. If you are most comfortable with your native language, you will be better able to communicate your feelings and ideas in that language. You can use words to label objects and describe what is happening as a way of teaching new words. You can recite rhymes and poems to develop her awareness of sounds. You can take turns talking about the day, things she notices, and books that you read together.

By talking together, you teach your child about the purpose of language, while helping her express her feelings and ideas. And by speaking to your child in your native language, you also teach her about her culture and her identity.

Excerpt from "Talking with Children." Reprinted with permission from ***PBS Parents***.

Question:

Will speaking to my child in my native language make it harder for him to learn English when he goes to school?

Answer:

Before children start school, they may be exposed to English on TV, in the playground, and in the print they see on cereal boxes and street signs. Children will learn a lot about English from the environment around them. If your child has also had some formal exposure to English, such as going to a playgroup in which English is the primary language spoken, then school can provide additional opportunities for him to learn the language.

Children and teachers alike can serve as models, helping your child communicate what he knows and can do. You may even be surprised by how quickly he picks up the language as he plays and learns alongside other English-speaking children. If your child has had no formal exposure to English, he will use what he knows about his native language to learn English — which will be a major task. Talk with your child's teacher about your goals for your child, as well as any concerns you have.

Excerpt from "Talking with Children." Reprinted with permission from ***PBS Parents***.

Question:

If we only speak to our child in English, will he lose his ability to speak in native language?

Answer:

Yes. You will therefore need to decide if you want your child to maintain his skills in your native language. Consider your long-term goals. If you and your family will not return to your home country, maintaining the native language may not be a priority. Also consider your family situation. If extended family members don't speak English, it will be important for your child to maintain his native language so he can communicate with people closest to him. Also consider how your child might feel about losing his native language and a sense of his cultural identity when he gets older.

Excerpt from "Talking with Children." Reprinted with permission from ***PBS Parents***.

Question:

My husband speaks to our daughter in English. I want to speak to her in my native language. Won't she get confused?

Answer:

Learning even just one language is a complex process. But young children have the potential to learn more than one language. Again, what is most important is that you talk with your child in the language with which you are most comfortable, so you can have the types of conversations that promote your child's thinking and language development.

It is also important to be a good language model and not mix up languages. That is, when talking with your child in English, don't mix in phrases and sentences from your native language. However, don't be surprised if your child uses words from both languages in one sentence. This is not a sign of confusion, but her current way of communicating what she wants to say.

Excerpt from "Talking with Children." Reprinted with permission from ***PBS Parents***.