Promoting Early Language and Literacy Development of English Language Learners: A Research-Based Agenda
Concept Paper
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“By 2023, more than half of the country’s student population will be non-white, and by 2042, the majority of the overall U.S. population will be non-white. ......The fastest-growing subpopulation is Hispanic/Latino---indeed by 2050, nearly one in three U.S. residents will be Hispanic---yet Hispanic children have some of the poorest educational outcomes in the country.”
Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010, p. 11

As the proportion of all U.S. students who speak a language other than English in the home continues to grow, educators at all levels will need to better understand how to raise the academic achievement, high school and college completion rates, and most significantly, the literacy levels of young English language learners (ELL). Currently, ELLs represent approximately 20% of the nation’s young children, in many areas of the country the proportion is growing rapidly, and English language learners are particularly vulnerable to low literacy levels at the end of third grade. ELLs represent the fastest growing student population in the U.S., growing by over 50% from 1998-2008.

Spanish is the most frequent non-English language spoken of the more than 400 different languages represented in the ELL population. Hispanic ELLs from low-income homes that speak little or no English at kindergarten entry are on average reading at very low levels at the end of fifth grade. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2009 report showed that of all fourth grade ELLs in the U.S., only 6% score at or above proficient in reading comprehension. In California, 85% of all English learners were found to lack proficiency in English Language Arts during the third grade. By any traditional measure, English language learners lag behind their peers in high school completion rates, all areas of academic achievement and especially reading comprehension levels.

One thing has become crystal clear in the last two decades: all young children need to learn to read and write in order to have a chance in school and later in life and solid reading skills by the end of third grade are essential to all future academic progress. The demographic and school performance data cited above also clearly highlight the

1 United States Census Bureau, 2008
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 For the purposes of this paper, English language learners (ELL) are young children between the ages of 3 and 8 years of age who are learning a second language (English) while still developing basic competency in their first language.
5 NCELA, 2008
6 Capps, et al., 2005
7 Miller & Garcia, 2008
8 Ibid.
9 Espinosa, 2010
urgent need to identify, evaluate, and disseminate practices and strategies that improve the percentages of young English language learners who enter the fourth grade with solid reading comprehension skills.

What is Early Literacy?

There are certain skills that underlie the ability to read. All children can learn to read if they have the opportunity to learn fundamental language skills within the context of safe and supportive personal relationships. These first and most endearing relationships are formed in the home setting and based on specific cultural norms and values.

Oral Language. Very young children learn and use language to communicate for a variety of purposes: to request, control, comment, reject, express emotion, gain attention, and acquire information, among others. During the preschool years, oral language development plays a central role in early literacy development. Promoting oral language development is a major goal for virtually all early childhood classrooms and is prominent in all state early learning standards. Oral language skills include the following abilities:

- To listen and comprehend spoken language,
- To use language to communicate with others,
- To use age-appropriate vocabulary and grammar,
- To hear and distinguish the sounds of language (any language)

Since the 1990’s all publicly funded early education programs have increased their emphasis on directly teaching early reading abilities that have been shown to predict later reading achievement. Emergent literacy skills, while including oral language abilities also encompass the following specific preschool literacy skills:

- **Alphabet Knowledge** (knowing the names and/or sounds of printed letters),
- **Phonological Awareness** (ability to detect, manipulate, or analyze component sounds in spoken language, independent of meaning such as the ability to match similar sounds, i.e., find words that all begin with “m”, and the ability to orally put together two syllables to form a compound word, i.e., “What word do you get when you put sun and shine together?”),
- **Rapid Automatized Naming of Letters/Digits** (ability to name rapidly a sequence of repeating random letters, digits, or both),
- **Rapid Automatized Naming of Objects/Colors** (ability to name rapidly a sequence of repeating random pictures of familiar objects or colors),
- **Writing/Writing Name** (ability to write single letters on request or to write own name) and
- **Phonological Memory** (ability to remember spoken information for a short time).

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Young children need to learn when and how to communicate effectively, to speak so others can understand them, to use an increasingly expanded vocabulary and grammatical structures that accurately convey their meanings, as well as letters of the alphabet, the purposes of print, how to manipulate sounds of words, and begin to write letters and words legibly. It is no longer a question of whether preschool programs should directly teach the alphabet and other literacy skills----but how they can most effectively be taught. For English language learners, this question is both urgent and complex, as most of the research on early literacy has been conducted with monolingual, native English speaking populations.

*Reading Comprehension.* Reading proficiency includes two inter-related sets of skills: decoding and comprehension. Decoding refers to the ability to understand that a printed word represents the spoken word, and that this printed word is made of a sequence of phonemes. Reading decoding skills also require the ability to recognize the individual phonemes and phoneme blends to make the printed text understandable. Decoding skills typically include the specific literacy skills described above: alphabetic knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid naming of letters, digits, objects, colors, writing skills, and phonological memory. There is a moderately strong relationship between preschool code-related skills and school age reading comprehension for native English speakers (0.44 to 0.48).12

The Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearing House defines reading comprehension as having two dimensions. The first is *vocabulary development* which includes the development of the knowledge of the meanings, uses, and pronunciation of words and the second is *reading comprehension* which refers to the understanding of the meaning of a passage and the context in which the word occurs.13 Reading comprehension is first built upon decoding skills. In order to understand the meaning of text, children must first be able to access the phonological form and attach it to their mental lexicon. A rich and extended vocabulary is important in making meaning—or having the mental lexicon that connects to the written text. Once these skills are established, the child can interpret the meanings of text, make inferences, and connect the content to their personal background knowledge. It is at this stage of reading development, typically around third grade, that oral language skills play an important role in helping children analyze and synthesize text, master new information, and build knowledge as they read—or *reading to learn* as opposed to *learning to read*.14

The specific oral language skills that develop during the preschool years and contribute to future reading comprehension include vocabulary knowledge, syntax, narrative and academic language use.15 Extended vocabularies allow children to attach meaning to the words they decode and comprehend written text. Traditionally, receptive vocabulary has been identified as a critical precursor to reading comprehension, particularly in native English speaking student populations.16 Other language skills such

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11 Hoover & Gough, 1990
12 NELP, 2008
13 What Works Clearing House, 2007
14 Dickinson & Freiberg, 2009
15 University of Chicago, 2010
16 Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001
as syntactic or narrative skills also have been shown to be predictive of later comprehension. Grammatical knowledge at age four has been found to be a stronger predictor of reading comprehension at grade two than early vocabulary skills. An additional oral language ability that has shown to support reading comprehension is narrative skill, the ability to organize narrative in time sequences, cause-effect relations, and problem-attempt-resolution sequences. Kindergarten narrative skills have been shown to correlate with later reading comprehension in several studies.

Finally, familiarity with a more formal, academic language style has been linked to reading comprehension. Academic language is less context-bound and typically uses more rare words, complex grammar, elaborated noun phrases, and information that involves abstract objects and events. The ability to talk about the past and future during the preschool years appears to be a significant predictor of later reading comprehension ability.

**English Language Learners**

As stated earlier, the vast majority of the research cited above was conducted with native speaking monolingual English speaking populations. While there are relatively fewer studies on the process of learning to read for ELLs, we have learned a great deal in the past decade about dual language development and its consequences for learning to read and comprehend English text. As with English only (EO) students, decoding and oral language skills have been shown to be important for reading comprehension with ELL populations. While decoding skills appear to develop at appropriate rates when ELLs receive high quality instruction, their comprehension abilities are far below age-grade expectations. In fact, ELLs’ knowledge of vocabulary has been shown to be two standard deviations below the national norm in preschool and continue to be significantly low through middle school. English language learners appear to develop the prerequisite decoding skills during the early childhood years, but not the linguistic capacity to understand the text they are decoding.

Empirical studies with young ELLs have repeatedly documented cross-linguistic influences between a child’s home language (L1) and second language (L2) oral language and reading skills (for a comprehensive review, see August & Shanahan, 2006). In general, well-controlled studies have shown that using the child’s home language to access knowledge and build early vocabulary and conceptual skills will facilitate reading development in the second language. After reviewing the meta-analyses of ELLs reading achievement, Eugene Garcia concluded that using a child’s primary or home

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17 Share & Leiken, 2004  
18 Muter, Hulme, Snowling, & Stevenson, 2004  
19 Kendeou, van den Broek, White, & Lynch, 2009  
20 Dickinson & McCabe, et al., 2003  
21 August & Shanahan, 2006; Kuhl, 2001  
22 Mancilla & Lesaux, 2010  
23 Espinosa & Zepeda, 2009; Kieffer, 2008  
24 Hammer et al., 2009; Paez, Tabors, Lopez, 2007  
25 Reese, Garnier, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 2000; Durgunoglu, et al., 2003
language boosts achievement in English by 0.2-0.3 standard deviations in test scores. Strategic use of the child’s home language while adding English language proficiency and building English reading skills appears to be significant, but not sufficient to improve reading comprehension and help close the achievement gap for ELLs. Pressing questions for educators, parents, and policy makers include: How to build English oral language and early literacy skills while continuing to support home language development; Which instructional strategies promote long-term achievement and school completion; How to extend learning so ELLs have sufficient time to develop skills necessary for reading comprehension; How to monitor progress of language and literacy development for ELLs; How to best support and guide parents of ELLs.

**Influences on Early Reading**

*Parents.* Clearly, parents have a huge impact on their children’s language development. The amount and quality of language interactions between children and parents is directly related to children’s vocabulary size and rate of vocabulary learning. In addition, the diversity of language usage, the proportion of rare words, the syntactic complexity of parental speech as well as the level of responsiveness and use of gestures all influence a child’s vocabulary development. Parents also influence a child’s development of narrative skills by discussions about the past and future. In general, children who experience rich linguistic input and language interactions with their parents from the first years of life develop more extended vocabularies and greater syntactic and narrative skills than other children. As these oral language abilities underlie later reading comprehension skills, young children with enriched early language learning opportunities are better prepared to master the challenges of reading comprehension.

Parents also help to prepare their children for the demands of formal reading instruction by introducing them to the wonders of books through interactive or shared book reading, family outings to the zoo and other cultural events, and passing on family traditions. These types of activities provide important background knowledge that will facilitate reading comprehension.

It is a long-standing tenet of early childhood education that family engagement with their children’s teachers will lead to better child outcomes. Family participation in school activities and regular contact between families and teachers are associated with child success. Families with young ELL children face particular challenges that include language barriers, logistical barriers and stressors related to low-income status, and family mobility. Although many parents of ELL children understand the importance of communication with their children’s teachers, this expectation may be frustrated by school attitudes and policies that discourage parental engagement.

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26 Garcia, 2010  
27 Hoff, 2006  
28 Rowe & Goldin-Meadow, 2009  
29 Peterson & McCabe, 1992  
30 Espinosa, 1996  
31 Fantuzzo, et al., 2004
Experts have identified a number of recommendations to improve the school involvement of parents with EL children. These include support for parental engagement strategies that are culturally and linguistically appropriate, support for parental involvement efforts that link the cultural strengths of the family and community to the classroom curriculum, support for the professional preparation of teachers that emphasizes a “funds of knowledge” perspective for classroom activities and community outreach, and the engagement of parents in efforts to learn about school expectations and to advocate for the best interest of their children.

**Sidebar:** As Espinosa has pointed out recently; family and community “funds of knowledge” can be important sources of classroom content for young ELLs.

Louis Moll and colleagues have demonstrated through first-hand research with families how the life experiences of children within the cultural context of their families have given them funds of knowledge.

*资金 of knowledge can be something as simple as extensive gardening expertise or as complex as knowing all about animal husbandry. Within this framework, all families have strengths and resources that have allowed them to construct knowledge in their everyday practices and interactions. By tapping into the rich funds of knowledge present in children’s households and communities, teachers can design curriculum that reflects and capitalizes on children’s existing knowledge. The culturally embedded knowledge of the home is confirmed and respected while extending to academically relevant and challenging goals.*

One of the most obvious barriers to family engagement is that of communication. Most early childhood programs acknowledge the importance of using the family’s primary language for parent communication and to facilitate interactive parent dialogue allowing parents to be full partners in their children’s success. The use of the home language is a concrete signal that the school desires communication with families. There are a variety of steps to accomplish this that include the use of bilingual staff in the reception areas, interpreters for parent meetings and conferences and published material in English and the home language (e.g., newsletters, bulletin board material).

In addition to a language barrier, non-English speaking families, particularly from low-income circumstances, are often viewed from a “deficit model” and not a strength based model. In a strength-based model, family expertise is appreciated, valued and acknowledged by school personnel as a basis for forming positive communication across language differences. The “funds of knowledge” perspective described above can assist educators in developing family outreach strategies that incorporate the expertise and talents of families and, by extension, their cultural communities into the classroom setting.

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32 Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008
33 Moll et al., 1992
34 Espinosa, 2010, pp. 67-68.
35 Espinosa & Zepeda, 2009
Scholars in parent involvement have pointed out that many families with ELL children have little knowledge of the U.S. educational system or have had previous negative experiences with it (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). In addition, perceptions about the role of the parent as a partner in the education of young children may be viewed differently from that of teachers. Parents may see their role primarily as one of nurturing the socio-emotional development of the child and not necessarily assisting their child with school related skills. The onus of initiating contact with families and overcoming these perceptions rests with the school.

The work of Arias and Morillo-Campbell (2008) recommends the use of both traditional forms and non-traditional forms for parent engagement. Traditional approaches outline practices that have been found to be effective in promoting school participation by parents across various population groups. Non-traditional approaches assume that there is a reciprocal understanding between schools and families about inherent family and community resources that can be marshaled for the benefit of children (See chart below, from Arias and Morillo-Campbell, 2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Non-Traditional</th>
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<td>Assists families with parenting and childrearing skills, and with creating home conditions to support learning.</td>
<td>Develops reciprocal understanding of schools and families.</td>
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<td>Communicates with families about school programs and student progress with two-way communication.</td>
<td>Situates cultural strengths of family and community within the school curriculum.</td>
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<td>Includes recruiting efforts to involve families as volunteers and audiences.</td>
<td>Provides parental education that includes family literacy and understanding the school community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Involves families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curricular-linked activities.</td>
<td>Promotes parental advocacy that informs and teaches parents how to advocate for their children.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Includes families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through councils and organizations.</td>
<td>Instills parental empowerment through parent-initiated efforts at the school and community level.</td>
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<td>Collaborates and coordinates with the work and community-based agencies, colleges and other groups to strengthen school programs.</td>
<td>Implements culturally and linguistically appropriate practices in all aspects of communication.</td>
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**Early Interventions.** Several recent studies have shown that systematic early instruction in decoding skills with ELLs will improve their ability to decode text. However, very few studies have identified strategies that predictably and significantly increase the third-fourth grade reading comprehension scores of English language learners. These disappointing findings are confirmed in the achievement data presented earlier in this paper. Of the 32 reading interventions designed for ELLs recently reviewed by the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), none were found to have “strong evidence of a positive effect” on children’s reading comprehension and only a few were found to

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36 Epstein, 2001  
37 Mancilla & Lesaux, 2010  
38 Miller & Garcia, 2009
have “evidence of positive or potentially positive effects for at least one improvement outcome”.

Recent studies on the impact of preschool attendance for ELLs have shown that attendance in high quality preschool improves English language outcomes particularly for children from Mexican immigrant families who speak only Spanish in the home. A recent experimental study of preschool ELLs who attended either a two-way immersion (50% Spanish, 50% English) or an English immersion (100% English) program showed that the children in the two-way immersion improved in their Spanish language development without any declines in their English development. Similarly, the Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth concluded,

“English language learners may learn to read best if taught both in their native language and English from early in the process of formal schooling. Rather than confusing children, as some have feared, reading instruction in a familiar language may serve as a bridge to success in English because decoding, sound blending, and generic comprehension strategies clearly transfer between languages that use phonetic orthographies, such as Spanish, French, and English.”

Several recent major meta-analyses and research syntheses have also concluded that high quality literacy instruction benefited ELL students as well as EO students, but that their effects were smaller and not enough to support high levels of reading achievement for ELLs. Many researchers have pointed out that ELLs need special instructional accommodations to keep pace with their EO peers. Genesee and colleagues concluded in their research synthesis that ELLs need a combination of interactive and direct instruction approaches with direct instruction on word-level and text decoding skills embedded within interactive learning environments that are meaningful and contextualized to the students’ backgrounds.

In summary, the ability to read comprises two inter-related components, decoding skills and comprehension abilities. ELLs appear to develop decoding skills when they are enrolled in high quality early literacy programs, but no approaches have consistently improved reading comprehension scores for ELLs. In addition, strategic use of the child’s home language combined with instructional adaptations appears to support long-term English reading achievement. The most recent research findings point to the need for early childhood educators to target oral language development as these skills contribute greatly to reading comprehension by grades two-three. In particular, extended vocabulary knowledge, understanding of complex syntax, narrative skills and academic language use are important to ELLs reading comprehension.

It is important to remember that there is great diversity within our ELL population. Young English language learners vary greatly both in their personal characteristics and their cultural, social, and language learning environments. The rates at

39 Gormley & Gayer, 2005
40 Barnett, et al., 2007
41 August & Shanahan, 2007, (p. 397).
42 Espinosa, 2010
43 Genesee et al., 2006
which they learn English as well as their eventual bilingual proficiency depends to a great extent on interactions between the child’s cognitive abilities, cultural background, personality, motivation, age, and the amount and quality of exposure to English. Some young ELL children have had little or no exposure to English prior to their entry into an early education classroom and may also have had limited extended language interactions in their home language. Others may have had systematic and extensive opportunities to learn both languages from their earliest years. Some are growing up in well-resourced households with highly educated bilingual parents while many live in homes where no-one speaks English and it is a daily struggle to meet basic needs.

These economic, linguistic, and cultural differences are significant and should not be overlooked. ELL children and families should not all be lumped together and treated as though they share the same strengths and needs. It is important for early childhood educators to know about each ELL child’s specific language background, what languages have been spoken in the home, by whom, for what amounts, and for what purposes. It is also important to find out about the parents’ attitudes toward maintaining the home language and acquiring English as parents have been shown to strongly influence whether or not a child continues to develop proficiency in his home language. Finally, ECE teachers should carefully observe and assess young ELL children to determine their initial proficiency and development in both English and their home language.

### Research-Based Strategies that Promote Reading Comprehension for ELLs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Oral Language: Listening/Speaking</th>
<th>Decoding/Word Level Skills</th>
<th>Language of Instruction</th>
<th>Engaging Families</th>
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<tr>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>Strategic use of home language to build comprehension; use gestures, visual cues to communicate meaning; frequent opportunities for extended conversations with peers and adults; systematically teach high priority vocabulary words; model and teach academic language; build narrative skills; provide multiple opportunities across contexts for ELLs to use and practice all emerging oral language skills; expand time</td>
<td>Use meaningful print connected to child’s background to build print knowledge; explicitly teach names and sounds of alphabet letters; promote phonological awareness through songs, chants, rhymes, finger-plays, and skilled story-book reading; encourage daily writing</td>
<td>Incorporate home language to extent possible thru books, tapes, native speakers, etc. during specified times of day (ideally minimum of 50%); introduce English (at least 25-30% of day)</td>
<td>Complete family languages and interests survey; use family primary language for all communications; encourage family literacy activities in home language; invite families into school and classrooms; incorporate family “funds of</td>
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44 Espinosa, 2010

45 These strategies are not meant to be exhaustive or comprehensive, but suggestive of teacher practices that promote reading comprehension. For more complete descriptions of teaching strategies for ELL students, see: California Preschool Curriculum Framework (2010); Espinosa (2010); Barone & Xu (2008); Goldenberg, 2010; Shatz & Wilkinson (2010).
**Loss of Home Language**

Research in the last two decades has also deepened our understanding of the consequences of losing one’s home language while mastering a second language. We have evidence that as soon as an ELL preschooler enters an English-dominant classroom, he starts to prefer to speak English and loses interest in continuing to use his first language.

*It is true that children in the preschool years can learn a language quickly and with little apparent effort. These are the years of rapid language development and children can acquire a language in a year or two simply by being in a setting where the language is in daily use. However, it is equally true that languages can be lost with equal ease during this period, especially when the language they are learning is more highly valued than the language they already speak. Over the years, I have tracked many young children who, as soon as they learn a little English in the school, put aside the language they already know and speak, and choose to communicate exclusively in English, even at home with family members who do not speak or understand much English.*

This early shift to English dominance often occurs at the expense of the home language. When children lose the ability to speak their first language, the language of

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**Table**

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<th>Age Range</th>
<th>ELL Literacy</th>
<th>Parent Education, Advocacy, and Empowerment Activities</th>
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<tr>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>Provide separate block of time for ELL literacy; continue to focus on listening comprehension and speaking; explicit instruction on vocabulary, syntax, grammar, functions, and conventions; connect to students’ personal experiences (activate prior knowledge)—integrate in meaningful context; emphasize academic language; focus on listening/reading comprehension strategies</td>
<td>Maximize use of English for instruction; use home language strategically; for continued home language development should be used at least 25-30% of time</td>
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</table>

Encourage families to volunteer in school and classroom; continue to learn about family language and culture; promote home-to-school and school-to-home learning

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46 Wong-Fillmore, 1996, p.37
their home, they are at risk for multiple negative outcomes: poorer academic achievement in English, loss of cultural and personal identity, decreased ability to communicate with and learn from important family members, and the loss of their potential bilingualism. The language they have learned to interpret and understand the world, to build enduring relationships with immediate family members, and to process information is no longer relevant—at the same time they are still struggling to master the basics of the English language.

Recent research has also demonstrated the multiple advantages of becoming bilingual. Infants who are growing up in bilingual settings (which is typical in many parts of the world) have displayed the innate capacity to acquire two languages without significant costs to the development of either language. Simultaneous dual language children generally experience the same milestones at approximately the same age as monolingual children. In addition to the capacity to acquire more than one language, there are special cognitive, linguistic, and social advantages of bilingualism. Preschool children who are systematically exposed to two languages during the preschool years demonstrate age-appropriate development in both languages as well as specific cognitive benefits associated with bilingualism.47 48

Sidebar. According to Zero to Three, the National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families:

Exposing your baby to a natural and rich environment in both English and Spanish will help her become bilingual before she ever begins any formal education. And, by providing your baby the opportunity to learn the language of your family’s culture, you are helping her develop a cultural identity and connection to her family’s roots.

There is still a lot of research to be done on childhood bilingualism. What we do know is that children can learn two or more languages during childhood without any problems. And that in fact, it is much easier to learn language in the early years. The following are some variables that impact bilingual development that parents should keep in mind:

Babies learn at their own individual pace. So your child may develop her language skills at a different rate than a monolingual child and it may have nothing to do with the fact that she is learning two languages at once.

A key variable for bilingual acquisition is consistency in how children are exposed to the two languages throughout their early childhood. You can choose to provide a consistency in a variety of ways. For example, you might speak only Spanish to her while Dad speaks only English. Or, your family may speak only Spanish in the home and English outside the home. For families who are living in communities where their home language is not supported, it is important to provide children with lots of language experience in the home to compensate.

Be aware that your child’s vocabulary in each language may be different than that of a monolingual child. Children learning two languages simultaneously may have smaller vocabularies in one or both languages, compared to children learning only one language. However, when both languages are taken into consideration, bilingual children tend to have the same number of words as monolinguals. Keep in mind that these differences are usually temporary. By the time most bilingual children have entered school, their vocabulary development has caught up with monolingual children.

Don’t worry about language mixing. When children start to use both languages in the same sentence, parents may wonder if they are getting confused by the exposure to and use of two languages. Actually, this combined usage is a very normal stage in bilingual language development. Rest assured, over time and with experience, your child will begin to sort the two languages out on her own.

So delight in the joy of hearing your child explore and master two languages. When she’s older, she’ll be able to tell you Thanks…and also Gracias!
We now have evidence that the development of two languages benefits the brain; greater brain tissue density in areas related to language, memory, and attention. Young children learning two languages also have more neural activity in the parts of the brain associated with language processing. This increased brain activity and neural density may have long-term positive effects on specific types of cognitive abilities, such as those that require focusing on the details of a task and knowing how language is structured and used—or metalinguistic abilities. These are important underlying linguistic competencies that promote high levels of reading abilities in the long-term. A recent synthesis of research on the language proficiency and academic achievement of ELLs has concluded that “there is strong convergent evidence that the academic achievement of English learners is positively related to sustained instruction that includes their first language”. The authors state:

All studies of middle and high school students found that students who had received bilingual instruction in elementary school were as or more successful than comparison group students. In addition, most long-term studies report that the longer students stayed in the program, the more positive were their outcomes. These results were found for reading and mathematics achievement, GPA, attendance rates, high school completion rates.

Finally, the amount of time devoted to language and literacy development for young English language learners will need to be increased. These children need both opportunities to develop language proficiency in their home language as well as time to transfer these skills to English and acquire the component English reading skills. In order to achieve at age-grade expectations, English language learners will need to acquire many skills and concepts in their native language, and accelerate their acquisition of English oral language and reading abilities. The time, resources, and attention required to achieve these outcomes will need to be expanded. We need to both improve our instructional approaches and expand the amount of quality learning time available for many young ELLs.

Recommendations for Practice

Early childhood programs can and should intentionally teach both oral language skills and, decoding skills to all children. No single skill should be taught in isolation, but multiple literacy goals should be integrated into engaging and age-appropriate approaches. Instruction that is based on warm, respectful, responsive relationships and is appropriate to the developmental, linguistic, and cultural capacities of each child is needed. In general, high quality literacy instruction for EO children is also good for English language learners—but it is not enough! English language learners require classroom and instructional enhancements and extended opportunities to learn in order to thrive and develop high levels of reading comprehension. In addition to warm and responsive relationships, ELL children learn best when teachers:

1. Have knowledge of each child’s early language learning background (e.g., first language spoken to child, by whom, extent of English exposure and usage);

49 Lindholm-Leary, 2011
50 Lindholm-Leary & Genesee, 2010
2. Know how to adapt their instruction and expectations based on knowledge of child’s stage of English acquisition;

3. Are knowledgeable about second language development and instructional practices that promote both maintenance of home language and English acquisition;

4. Strategically use the home language for reading development and encourage and support the use of the home language across the instructional day;

5. Provide direct instruction on certain aspects of English reading development: alphabet knowledge; targeted vocabulary learning with gestures, music and visual and pictorial cues, expanded explanations, and opportunities to practice new vocabulary across multiple contexts; systematic phonics instruction embedded within meaningful contexts; and explicitly connecting knowledge in home language to English language development;

6. Target multiple aspects of oral language development including, complex syntactic structure, and opportunities to learn narrative skills and practice the use of new and rare vocabulary words;

7. Provide daily opportunities for small group and individualized interactions with adults in both the home language and English;

8. Connect the learning environment with the cultures and languages of the children enrolled (e.g., print, books, media, pictures, and stories that reflect the languages and cultures of the children);

9. Increase the time available for ELL children to master English language proficiency and reading comprehension through extended school days and summer learning programs;

10. Engage ELL families in the academic learning of their children in linguistically and culturally appropriate approaches.\textsuperscript{51}

\textbf{Recommendations for Policy}

1. Federal, State and local governments should increase their investments in family education and support programs for ELL families with children ages birth-eight.

2. State and local policies support community-based education programs that inform parents about school values and expectations and help them become advocates for their children.

3. Expand the time available for preschool English language learners to learn language skills by investing in two-year, year round preschool programs.

4. Extend the school day and school year for young English language learners who need extra time to “catch up” to their native English-speaking peers.

5. Invest in research that designs and carefully evaluates the efficacy of specific strategies for improving oral language abilities and reading comprehension for ELLs, including those that work in urban, rural settings, and for bilingual as well as monolingual English-speaking teachers.

6. Identify the need to focus attention and resources to improving the reading proficiency of English language learners, especially those in growing up in poverty, as a high national priority.

\textsuperscript{51} Espinosa, 2010; Castro, Espinosa, & Paez, in press
7. Field test and evaluate well-designed preschool-grade three coordinated approaches that provide a continuous, articulated program of instruction and assessment.

8. Invest in research on assessment tools that accurately capture both Spanish and English language development for preschool children. These tools are urgently needed to both inform instructional decision-making and track growth in both languages.

9. Support teacher preparation and professional development programs that prepare teachers to effectively teach English language learners and actively engage diverse families in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways.

10. Actively disseminate information to both professional and lay audiences on effective approaches to improving reading comprehension for English language learners; help to dispel common myths about first and second language development and academic achievement.

Footnotes


2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. For the purposes of this paper, English language learners (ELL) are young children between the ages of 3 and 8 years of age who are learning a second language (English) while still developing basic competency in their first language.


Arizona State University: Office of the Vice President for Educational Partnerships.


40. Barnett, S.


45. These strategies are not meant to be exhaustive or comprehensive, but suggestive of teacher practices that promote reading comprehension. For more complete descriptions of teaching strategies for ELL students, see: California Preschool Curriculum Framework (2010); Espinosa (2010); Barone & Xu (2008); Goldenberg, 2010; Shatz & Wilkinson (2010).


