
HOW DO THEY DO IT? SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

by Kimberlee Spencer and Karen Petty

Josselyn just said “No!” to her friend in English. At first glance this might not seem like much, but for Josselyn, understanding and speaking English is a significant accomplishment. Josselyn just turned 5 years old and is beginning the second half of pre-kindergarten in a North Texas public school.

When Josselyn started school in August, she spoke only Spanish. When someone spoke to her in English, she answered in Spanish. When asking for assistance, she communicated to her teacher in Spanish. Josselyn quickly figured out that the language she spoke and the language the teacher used were not the same.

So instead of speaking Spanish, her native language, she refrained from speaking at all—until now.

Just because Josselyn didn’t speak for several months doesn’t mean she didn’t communicate. She began to use more gestures and body language for communicating with her teachers and classmates. On one occasion Josselyn came running to her teacher pointing to the construction center. Her teacher noticed that Josselyn was upset and asked her in English what was wrong. Josselyn began pointing to a classmate and pinching herself on the arm. Josselyn didn’t say a word, but her teacher knew exactly what had happened.

As early childhood professionals, we need to understand how young children make this change from speaking one language to speaking two. The subject of second languages contains important aspects to consider when providing the best educational experience possible for children.

Why do I need to learn about English as a second language?

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2005), approximately one-third of the Texas population older than 5 years of age speaks a language other than English. The number goes even higher when you add children younger than 5.

Who provides care for these children outside the home? Many of these families qualify for Head Start and state-based pre-kindergarten. Others will not be exposed to English instruction until they enter kindergarten and are placed in a bilingual classroom. Early childhood professionals must be knowledgeable about how these children develop both content and language skills.

According to the National Child Care Information Center (2004), the Hispanic population in Texas is 32 percent of the state population. In this article, we will focus on Spanish as the native language, although all information provided applies to any native language other than English.

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Native language, English, or bilingual instruction?

With more non-English speaking children entering early childhood programs, child care providers are faced with the question of how to provide an appropriate education for these young children. There are several methods for helping children acquire English as a second language, but we will look at three. They are native language instruction, English language instruction, and bilingual instruction (Tabors 1997), as shown in the table below.

Educational Setting: Native language instruction

Children's native language: Spanish

Teachers speak: Spanish

Instruction in: Spanish

Educational Setting: English language instruction

Children's native language: Spanish

Teachers speak: English

Instruction in: English

Educational Setting: Bilingual instruction

Children's native language: Spanish

Teachers speak: Spanish and English

Instruction in: Spanish and English

According to many researchers, the most effective method for second language acquisition is bilingual instruction (Krashen 2004, Cummins 2000, and Tabors 1997). Krashen (2004) found that it's easier for children to learn to read in a language they understand and then transfer that knowledge to English. He stresses the importance of learning content, such as where animals live, in the child's native language.

Cummins (1979) suggests two types of language: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS refers to the conversational skills of children in their second language as opposed to CALP, the academic language of these children. According to Cummins (1979), it takes less time for children to reach conversational proficiency in their second language than it does to reach academic language proficiency in their second language.

Most teachers can agree that some children are able to have conversations in their second language but are not as successful with academic content.

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)

Conversational skills—telling stories and experiences

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)

Academic content—identifying something that lives in the ocean, for example

Cummins (2000) writes that children who develop two or more languages have a better understanding of the languages and how to use them. This supports the goal of bilingual education to improve the native language while developing the second language. Bilingual teachers can support the development of both languages simultaneously in a manner that values the native language. These teachers are especially equipped to provide experiences in both languages, which can help children develop strong language skills.

What about classrooms that don't have bilingual teachers? Classroom environments, activities, and interactions can help young children develop language skills. Tabors (1997) has provided suggestions for teachers of children acquiring a second language. Many of the suggestions provided below are useful in any classroom, not just those with children acquiring a second language. Teachers who are not bilingual can still succeed in helping children develop language.

Second language acquisition or second language learning?

Krashen (1988) defines language acquisition as a process that includes natural communication in the new language. In natural communication, the focus is on the message rather than the form. When Josselyn pointed to her picture and said, "My name," her teacher responded to the message rather than the incomplete sentence in English. Josselyn's teacher restated the information correctly, "Oh, you wrote your name on the paper," while pointing to the letters on the paper Josselyn was holding.

Language learning implies academics and instruction (Krashen 1988). Language learning uses more explicit error correction and discussion. In the above example, if Josselyn's teacher was focused on language learning, she would have said something like, "Josselyn, say 'I wrote my name.'" This interaction may have discouraged Josselyn from continuing to try to use English and may have deflated her excitement about writing her name.

For young children, language acquisition is the preferred method and is considered developmentally appropriate. Rather than correcting mistakes, teachers can scaffold language development by restating and expanding the child's language.

Possible interaction in a language learning classroom

Child: "Milk."

Teacher: "That's not how we ask for more. Say, 'Can I have more milk please?'"

Possible interaction in a language acquisition classroom

Child: "Milk."

Teacher: "Oh, you would like more milk, please? Yes, I will get you some more milk."

In 2005 the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) published a statement titled, "Many languages, many cultures: Respecting and responding to diversity." This position statement explains that bilingualism is an asset and children should be supported in maintaining their native language. Like Cummins (2000), NAEYC's position statement endorses the belief that it's easier for children to learn complex concepts in their native language before transferring that knowledge to a second language.

What is the process of English language acquisition?

When acquiring a second language, individuals go through four stages (Tabors 1997). They are 1) native language use, 2) a nonverbal phase, 3) a pre-productive phase, and 4) a productive phase. Researchers believe that people of all ages who are acquiring a second language pass through these four stages. This information is useful not only for teachers working with children acquiring a second language but their families as well.

In the first phase, children are unaware that others may not be able to understand them. They will enter the classroom expecting everyone to understand their language and will try to communicate through their native language. It will take time for these children to understand that the language they use at home does not work in some environments.

At the beginning of the year Josselyn often spoke to her English-speaking teachers and classmates in Spanish. She tried to explain what she wanted to do and was eager to report anyone who had broken a class rule. Her teacher tried to decipher what she was saying based on Josselyn's gestures but was usually unsuccessful. Once Josselyn realized her

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS, ACTIVITIES, AND INTERACTIONS CAN HELP YOUNG CHILDREN DEVELOP LANGUAGE SKILLS.

native language did not help her in the classroom, she entered a nonverbal phase.

During this second phase, children may stop speaking altogether. They may no longer use their native language nor try to use English. This phase varies in length for each child. For some children it may last for a few weeks, and for others it may be months. During this phase, children are gathering information about the new language they are hearing. These children are listening and watching in order to make connections with the new language.

Younger children spend more time in the nonverbal phase than older children (Tabors 1997).

According to Josselyn's teachers, she spent approximately three months in this phase. Josselyn not only stopped speaking Spanish to her English-speaking classmates but also stopped speaking to her Spanish-speaking classmates. Josselyn was not speaking, but she was still developing her English and Spanish language skills.

In addition to gathering information about the new language, children may also begin imitating the sounds they hear in the new language. These children may carefully watch people who are speaking English and try to copy their movements and sounds (Tabors 1997). Children may not use these efforts to communicate, but it shows that they are moving toward the pre-productive phase.

Once children are ready to practice their new language, they enter the pre-productive phase. During this third phase, children are comfortable enough to begin to use English. A child may begin by repeating the word "car" when prompted by the teacher and progress to telling a classmate "Good-bye" or "Thank you." Like babies acquiring a native language, these children will repeat and experiment with words they hear often (Tabors 1997). The benefits of the time spent in the nonverbal phase will begin to show. With opportunities to practice, children will move into the final phase.

In the productive phase (Tabors 1997), children build their own sentences in English. They will start with one-word responses such as "Juice" and proceed to full sentences like "Can I have juice?" With appropriate English models and opportunities to practice their English vocabulary, proficiency will increase. Children will begin to use their developing vocabulary and create sentences with multiple words as well as improving their pronunciation. Again, the use of the second language will be affected by the child's security in the classroom and opportunities to hear and use their new language in a supportive environment.

The following table explains the four stages of second language acquisition. It shows each stage and the language that may be observed in it. The table offers a handy reference for teachers to discover where children are and where they are headed in their language development.

Native language use phase

Child uses native language to speak to everyone.

Nonverbal phase

Child does not speak, may attempt to make "English sounds."

Pre-productive phase

Child repeats words, uses common words like, *hello, good-bye*.

Productive phase

Child builds on one word sentences.

How can I help the children in my class?

As children move through the four phases of second language acquisition, they need support from nurturing teachers in supportive environments. Asher (1982) introduced the concept of Total Physical Response as a tool for helping children acquire language. One important aspect of this concept is providing physical movement while acquiring language. Physical movement includes using gestures, objects, and pictures. Early childhood professionals can provide opportunities to act out language and manipulate real objects to reinforce language learning.

USING GESTURES, OBJECTS AND PICTURES AIDS IN DEVELOPING LANGUAGE.

The following table provides examples of specific supports early childhood professionals can provide to children acquiring a second language. Basically teachers can make children comfortable in the classroom and in social situations.

Interactions

- Always respond to any attempt to use any language.
- Use gestures.
- Repeat and emphasize words.
- Talk about what is happening at that moment.
- Extend language by adding to what the child says.
- Provide language at each child's level of ability and scaffold.
- Speak slowly.
- Don't force anyone to speak.
- Model correct English.
- Encourage conversations at meal times.

Activities

- Include every student in the classroom community.
- Provide many opportunities for children to talk throughout the day.
- Provide small group activities.
- Plan activities that strengthen listening skills.
- Provide small group book reading.
- Read books with predictable text.
- Read books over and over again.

Materials

- Provide real objects whenever possible.
- Arrange space for children to play alone.

Daily schedule

- Provide time to become familiar with the classroom, teachers, and other students.
- Maintain consistent routines.
- Daily schedule that allows time for free choice.
- Keep whole group time short.

Information adapted from Tabors 1997

What about parents?

Tabors (1997) provides a powerful example of how to talk with parents about native and second languages. A teacher might say to parents: "Your role is to teach your children about the world. My role is to teach them the English to talk about what they understand about the world."

Parents are a child's first teacher. Early childhood programs can work with parents to support one another and extend classroom experiences (Tabors 1997). Programs can encourage parents to be involved in their child's classroom and provide many opportunities for parent involvement throughout the year. When parents are involved, the

teacher can model activities and interactions, support the family, and build a sense of community in the classroom.

Home visits are another important way to involve parents and a great way for teachers to learn about each family and their culture. Home visits are highly effective in reaching hard-to-reach families and in focusing on the whole family rather than just the child (Bogenschneider 2002, Freeman and Freeman 1994).

What about other models of instruction?

In addition to the strategies presented, there are variations in native language and bilingual instruction. One such model is 50/50 instruction in which some content is taught in English and some content is taught in Spanish.

Another is a transitional model in which, for example, a kindergarten teacher may teach 90 percent of the day in Spanish and 10 percent of the day in English. The goal is to move these children to all English over the course of five or six years.

For more information on these strategies and others, see the National Association of Bilingual Educators Web site, www.nabe.org.

Be prepared to provide a positive experience

Many children whose native language is not English are enrolled in English-speaking early childhood programs. Teachers and administrators must be prepared to provide positive experiences for all children. Knowledge of the benefits of a bilingual classroom, the stages of second language acquisition, methods to use in the classroom, and ways to support families form the foundation of quality programs for young children developing a second language.

At the same time, parents and professionals need to remember that children have individual differences that will affect their language development. A program that may work in one community may not be as effective in another. Children come to the classroom with different experiences and interact differently with other children and adults. Providing an environment that works for all children is not always easy but it is important.

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