

PROMOTING CULTURAL & LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

Supporting bilingualism in the early childhood classroom

by Melissa Cavaluzzi

We live in a world that becomes more interconnected every day. Language is a large part of this interconnection because it is the primary means for communication. Knowing more than one language, or being bilingual, not only connects you to your culture and family heritage, it also provides cognitive benefits.

Even with that said, American children are much more likely to be monolingual, while in world terms, children are commonly bilingual (Genesee 2008). The reasons could be the misconceptions many Americans have about bilingualism and the lack of communication between families and their children's educators and caregivers.

Dispelling early misconceptions of bilingualism

In 1962 researchers Peal and Lambert discovered that earlier studies of the effects of bilingualism did not take into account the socioeconomic status of their bilingual and monolingual subjects. This omission likely accounted for the found negative effects, such as language delay, of learning two languages at once. In these early studies, most often, "bilinguals from poor backgrounds were compared with monolinguals from high social classes" (Hakuta 1986). The results were likely skewed because of the differing educational levels and opportunities available to a child of higher socioeconomic class versus a child from a lower socioeconomic class.

In addition, researchers before Peal and Lambert did not ensure that their bilingual subjects were truly bilingual, which also may have led to unreliable

results. If children were not bilingual at the same level, their knowledge could not accurately be compared.

Peal and Lambert discovered these faults in earlier research when they did their own study at a French school system in Montreal. To ensure accuracy, these researchers made sure their subjects were equal in socioeconomic status; all were middle class. Their research showed that when tested on verbal and non-verbal measures, "bilingual children performed reliably better than the monolinguals" and "bilinguals enjoy a certain advantage in cognitive flexibility over their monolingual counterparts" (Hakuta 1986).

Peal and Lambert broke new ground in bilingual research when they made sure that all the subjects in their study came from the same socioeconomic background. Since then, similar research has been done all over the world in middle class populations. "Overwhelmingly, they claim that bilingualism has positive effects" (see a literature review by Rafael Diaz in Hakuta 1986).

As educators, we can play an important role in dispelling any misconceptions that may lead families to hesitate about raising their children to be bilingual. For a child to become a successful bilingual, teachers need to work closely with the family to provide supportive environments for the acquisition of both the home and school languages.

Benefits of bilingualism

Becoming bilingual has important benefits, as addressed by Colin Baker (1995) in *A Parents' and Teachers' Guide to Bilingualism*.

Wider world perspective. Learning another language enables a child to have two different world perspectives and cultural experiences. In addition, that child often becomes “the bridge between generations.” In other words, with the knowledge of the heritage language, the child will be able to communicate with the older generations of the family and those that live in their native country, keeping the child connected to forebears. The child is also able to maintain a close relationship with the immediate family because parents often are more comfortable expressing love in their native language.

Economic advantages. In our ever-shrinking global job market, proficiency in another language often opens up more job options.

Cognitive benefits. According to Baker, a bilingual has been found to “think more flexibly and creatively” than a monolingual.

Bridge building. Finally, and arguably most important, “those who speak two languages symbolize the essential humanity of building bridges between peoples of different color, creed, culture and language” (Baker 1995).

As educators, we need to address these benefits, along with the myths, when discussing bilingualism with families.

Understanding the importance of home language

For a child, learning one’s heritage language and culture is crucial to developing a sense of self.

“Language is a symbol of cultural and personal

identity” (Jones and Lorenzo-Hubert 2008). If children do not learn their home language, according to Genesee, they “risk becoming alienated” from their families and communities. After all, the home language serves as a way that “parents can communicate easily with them and take full responsibility for socializing them and preparing them for schooling later on” (Wong-Fillmore 1991, cited in Genesee 2008). Through their native language interaction with their children, families instill value and belief systems and other social skills (NAEYC 1995).

In addition, the home language is often the only one a child can use to communicate with family and community members, communication that is vital to the child’s understanding of the native culture. Without that crucial interaction, families and communities begin to disconnect and destabilize, and this is detrimental to a child’s developing identity (NAEYC 1995).

Raising a child to be bilingual requires a conscious effort from a child’s educators and guardians. Genesee urges parents of bilingual children to “provide systematic exposure to both languages all the time” and avoid radical changes to the child’s language environment. “Such changes can disrupt language development and create difficulties for the child” (2006). Ideally, parents and teachers will work together to ensure consistency and success.

Many factors influence language development. These factors include “exposure to different quantities and styles in language usage, child rearing practices, cultural and linguistic backgrounds of parents



and other caregivers, whether they have siblings or other extended family members, and individual child development” (Jones and Lorenzo-Hubert 2008).

Every child is unique and no two children will develop their languages exactly the same. When raising bilingual children, it’s wise for families to educate themselves on language development. In addition, educators need to be ready to support the dual language acquisition process, working together with the family “in the development of academic competence” (Commins and Miramontes 2006).

Supporting dual language learners

Children are being sent to educational settings early in their lives because family members must work. This means that caregivers and teachers “will influence the child’s values, views of the world, perspectives on family and connections to the community” (NAEYC 1995). In addition, these caregivers will have a critical impact on the child’s social, emotional, and cognitive development.

As a result, the child’s family and educators must work as a team to guarantee success. If children are in a supportive school environment, they are much less likely to lose their home language, a situation that could threaten the children’s important ties to family and community (NAEYC 1995).

This involvement and support begins when the child enrolls in an early childhood program. To get a better idea of the child’s exposure to the home language, educators can inquire about its use. Who uses it, when do they use it, and for what purpose? If staff members are “knowledgeable about bilingualism and second language acquisition,” children can be properly served (Rodriguez 2008).

Ideally, staff members are involved in professional development sessions that educate them and keep them up-to-date on bilingual issues, benefits of bilingualism, and the negative effects of a child’s loss of his native language, so that the minority languages are truly accepted in the classroom. This kind of training and awareness will help create a continuous dialogue between teachers and families throughout their time in the program.

According to Rodriguez, if staff members speak a child’s heritage language, they should speak it with the child to demonstrate that important people speak that language too, which helps the child to feel more pride in the language and culture. Often

families feel pressure to make their children assimilate and learn English quickly to succeed, and the home language is lost, which can be damaging to a child’s identity.

Baker (1997) offers this important observation:

In U.S. schools with large transitional programs, there is sometimes a hidden message in the staffing. The people with power and prestige, such as principals and assistant principals, are often English monolinguals (Garcia 1993). The people with the least power and status are cooks, lunch monitors, cleaners and janitors, who, for example, speak a minority language such as Spanish.... The language to learn is the language of power and prestige. The language to forget is the language of servitude, stigma and shame. The message is loudly proclaimed without words.

It is the teacher’s job, then, to ensure that within her classroom, a mutual respect is established among the children and with her. If taught from an early age to “respect different cultures, children gain positive feelings about themselves and learn to live and work together respectfully” (Hepburn 2007). Establishing a classroom community built on support and respect will benefit all children, not just the bilinguals, and prepare them for the diverse world that surrounds them.

LANGUAGE IS A SYMBOL OF CULTURAL AND PERSONAL IDENTITY.

JONES AND LORENZO-HUBERT

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (1995), in its position statement on linguistic and cultural diversity, recommends that “Educators must **accept** the legitimacy of children’s home language, **respect** (hold in high regard) and **value** (esteem, appreciate) the home culture, and **promote** and **encourage** the active involvement and support of all families, including extended and non-traditional family units” [bold in original text].

As educators, we can ensure that we are acting in alignment with NAEYC’s guidelines in specific ways. Firstly, we can ensure that staff members are able to

define bilingualism, identify its benefits, and be aware of programs available to develop bilingualism.

In addition, staff members need to be familiar with philosophies on second-language acquisition and the challenges families may face while raising a bilingual child (Rodriguez 2008). Staff should also be able to address “misconceptions about a) the best time to acquire two languages, b) time required to become bilingual, c) effects of maintaining the native language on the acquisition of English, and d) the impact of birth order in becoming bilingual.” If a teacher is educated on the issue of bilingualism, the child’s family is much more likely to make an informed and carefully considered decision and create a more enriching environment for the child to thrive.

Teachers can encourage families to expose their children to their minority language (and culture) through songs, dances, and other family and community activities. From an early age children will build connections to their community, heritage, and families that will help children shape their identity.

Another essential part of supporting not just bilinguals, but all diverse cultures, is to involve families in the classroom by having them come in to share songs, stories, and dances from their culture and language. This creates a sense of pride and connection to one another within the class, celebrating their diverse backgrounds while noticing how intrinsically similar they all are.

Classroom techniques

Once a child enters a school environment, especially at an early age, an alliance between the child’s parents and educators is essential. Educators need to acquire information from the family before assuming a child’s linguistic or cultural background (Tabors 1997). This communication can be face-to-face in English, in the parents’ home language with a translator, or through written messages like a formal questionnaire at the beginning of the year.

If an educator does not have access to parent liaisons, often community members are a resource as translators. As Tabors writes in *One Child, Two Languages*, “public schools, churches, community agencies, community newspapers and even local grocery stores are good places to ask about translation services.”

It is important to establish an open line of communication from the beginning, and making the effort

to include a translator in meetings will undoubtedly help parents feel more comfortable and supported.

Tabors outlines several helpful techniques for teachers with English Language Learners (ELLs) in their classrooms to ensure proper support for the children’s language acquisition.

Body language. Using body language, or what Tabors refers to as “buttressing communication,” has been found to be an effective method of communication. In other words, the teacher can add a gesture, action, or directed gaze to a statement in order to assist a child’s understanding. Another method is repeating a particular word or phrase to emphasize it and putting it at the end of the sentence for better comprehension (Tabors).

Expanding a child’s vocabulary. Using a child’s words, however minimal they may be, can expand and develop vocabulary. For instance, if an ELL child says, “potty,” the teacher may respond, “Do you need to go potty? Let’s go to the bathroom and you can try to go potty.” By taking the original word uttered by the child and expanding the idea, the teacher extends the vocabulary used to describe what the child wishes to do. Finally, it is important to challenge ELL children to develop more vocabulary and not rely too heavily on nonverbal signals (Tabors).

Using the classroom environment. Tabors writes that the manipulatives area in the early childhood classroom is often a favorite for ELL students. It is a “safe haven” for them because they do not need anyone else to participate, and the pressure of communicating in their second language is temporarily relieved.

On the other hand, teacher-directed small group activities help ELL children feel a part of the group (Tabors). Native English speakers are a valuable resource because they allow ELL children to practice their oral language skills. Group work also provides the opportunity to develop relationships with peers. Small groups remove some of the anxiety associated with speaking English because it is a more intimate and less intimidating setting where peers are likely to be more understanding and helpful.

Maintaining routines. Routines are crucial for most young children, especially those learning a second language. A structured routine in the classroom could aid in an ELL child’s comprehension and creates stability and predictability in everyday school life. However, Tabors notes, children can

become so familiar with a routine that it may appear that they understand more English than they actually do. Often this is revealed only when the routine has been altered and the ELL children mistakenly continue to follow the old schedule.

Results of a supportive educational environment

When early childhood educators actively support a child's dual language acquisition, the results are undeniably positive. An encouraging environment strengthens the connection between the school program and the family, enabling the young child to "feel supported, nurtured and connected not only to their home community and families but also to teachers and the educational setting" (NAEYC 1995). Establishing this connection to both entities early on is essential to a child's identity and dual language acquisition.

If a developing bilingual child attends a school that does not support his home language, that language is much more likely to deteriorate, with harmful effects on the child's sense of identity and connection to community and family. Put bluntly, preventing children from learning their minority language would "entail social and personal costs that can easily be avoided" (Genesee 2008). There's research to support this claim.

Baker (1997) outlines the advantages to programs like the Canadian Heritage Language Program that he researched. The benefits include "positive self-concept and pride in one's background; better integration of

child into school and society; more tolerance of other people and different cultures; increased cognitive, social and emotional development; ease in learning of new languages; increased probability of employment; fostering stronger relationships between home and school; responding to the needs and wishes of community (Canadian Educational Association 1991)."

With the increasing number of young children acquiring two languages simultaneously, it seems as though there would be many advantages to having similar programs available to children in the United States. Especially in young children, the influence of the educator is significant, and that educator is thereby often entrusted with the task of instilling values in these future citizens.

Therefore, as Hepburn outlines, the early childhood environment should "value diversity, teach from a multicultural perspective and promote anti-bias and tolerance for differences" (Hepburn 2007), thereby showing respect for families and their cultural and linguistic differences. Children pick up on even our most subtle biases and prejudices, so as educators we must be mindful of the preferences we may be projecting.

Educators need to be aware of the internal biases they carry, "although teachers may claim (and believe) that they treat all students equally, all too often their conscious and unconscious attitudes toward different cultures can result in very different academic outcomes for students from differing backgrounds" (Commins and Miramontes 2006).

French historian and political thinker Alexis de



Tocqueville once said, “the tie of language is perhaps the strongest and the most durable that can unite mankind.” Often language is the thread that strengthens a family’s relationship and connection to their shared past. In order for children to fully understand their culture and family history, they must be able to speak to their relatives and community members in their heritage language.

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ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

Beyond the benefits to cognitive and occupational skills, the knowledge and maintenance of one’s home language is a vital piece in the shaping of a young child’s identity. Unfortunately, the native language is often lost because of the belief that one must quickly assimilate into American culture and learn English to succeed. This is commonly the reason immigrants do not maintain their heritage language once they come to America (Hakuta 1986).

The task of dismissing these misconceptions rests on the shoulders of early childhood educators, who can advocate for the maintenance of those home languages by encouraging families to continue to raise their children bilingual and support their efforts in doing so.

As Christensen (2008) writes, “approaching students’ home languages with respect is one of the most important curricular choices teachers can make.” Because respect and appreciation for diverse languages and cultures are shaped at an early age, educators need to be mindful of their everyday words and actions.

After all, demographers project that ELL children “will account for approximately 40 percent of the entire school aged population in the United States” by the 2030s (Roseberry-McKibbin and Brice 2000). Consequently, early childhood educators would do well to revisit and perhaps revise their teaching techniques to support this growing number of diverse learners.

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