

The Home Language Advantage

USING CHILDREN'S PRIMARY LANGUAGE TO BUILD LITERACY SKILLS

by Alice Escobar

Do you increasingly have children in your classroom who speak a language other than English? If so, you are not the only teacher experiencing this trend. According to the 2010 Census figures, the foreign-born population in the United States reached nearly 40 million, up from 19.8 million in 1990 and 31.1 million in 2000 (Gibson & Jung, 2006), and nearly 24 percent of children younger than eight have immigrant parents, compared to 20 percent in 1990 and 20 percent in 2000 (Fortuny, Hernandez, & Chaudry, 2010, p. 1).

One result of this increase, according to the Washington, DC-based Urban Institute, is that approximately 34 percent of young children of immigrants age 0–8 live in “linguistically isolated” households where no person age 14 or older is English proficient (p. 5). Nearly 15 percent of young children in out-of-home care live in families where only one or neither parent speaks English (Iruka & Carver, 2006) and approximately 30 percent of Head Start



Research clearly shows that when teachers support the development of children's home language in the classroom, ELL children learn English faster and perform better in school over the long term.

children speak a language other than English at home (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011).

As young English learners enter kindergarten, they often lag behind their English-speaking peers in literacy and other academic skills, with the gap remaining throughout their school years (Restrepo & Towle-Harmon, 2008, p. 1). Without the necessary support from teachers, young English learners will continue to “face the challenges of mastering a new language, face barriers to accessing the curriculum, and persistently end up in the lowest levels of academic achievement” (p. 1). These facts present a new set of

opportunities and challenges for the early education field, and as professionals we can welcome these trends and learn to use cultural and language diversity to enrich the experiences of all children in our classrooms.

Research over the last three decades on second language acquisition, brain development, effective programs, and “best practices” in teaching English learners (Olsen, 2006; Rivera & Collum, 2006) has shown that when teachers foster the development of children’s home language in the classroom, ELLs learn English faster and perform better in school long term. This accumulated body of knowledge about dual language learning offers solid evidence that “a consistent, coherent approach to education that provides continuous, enhanced learning opportunities from Prekindergarten through Third Grade (PK-3) offers the best chance for improved academic performance” (Espinosa, 2008, p. 3) for English language learners. Given more time to master English as well as academic content, ELL children are poised at the end of third grade to

go on to have successful academic careers (Espinosa, 2008).

The “Myths” of English Language Acquisition

On first impression, the idea that fostering children’s home language in the classroom facilitates their acquisition of English may seem to run counter to common sense. Common questions prompted by this claim include the following: Won’t children fall behind in school if we continue to support their primary language instead of focusing on English? Doesn’t learning in two languages confuse a child and interfere with learning English? How can we support children’s primary language if we do not speak the language? These are important and valid concerns, so it is critical to understand the research behind English language learning. As one expert notes, many of these questions arise out of misunderstandings or “myths” (Espinosa, 2008) about learning a second language. Let’s look more closely at these questions and see how the current research in the field of dual language acquisition dispels a few of these common myths.

Won’t children fall behind in school if we continue to support their primary language instead of focusing on English?

The answer here is an emphatic “No.” Research shows that the greater children’s vocabulary, phonological awareness,

Children who have begun decoding letter-sound connections in their home language can apply this same rule to letter-sound connections in English.

alphabet knowledge, concepts about print, and writing skills in their home language, the more easily they transfer those abilities to their second language (Bialystok, 2001). This transfer is further facilitated in the preschool setting when children are encouraged to both retain communication skills in their home language and receive support in the acquisition of their second language (Cheatham & Ro, 2010).

Instructional programs for English language learners work best when students have opportunities to develop proficiency in their first language.

Imagine yourself, traveling to China or Egypt and, upon arrival, having to communicate your basic needs, ideas,

and concerns in another language. Then imagine enrolling in school and having to learn and retain important academic information — not to mention communicate with peers — in a language you do not speak or understand. In other words, “Your job is to learn what everyone else is learning, plus learn English” (Goldenberg, 2008, p. 9). As ELLs discover that they cannot use their home language to communicate with adults and peers, they enter a nonverbal and listening period. During this phase, they work to pick up cues, key words, and brief statements to make sense of what is going on in their learning environment. They start connecting English words with specific objects (e.g., *table, book, paint*); they identify specific actions they are expected to carry out (e.g., *sit down, listen, walk*); and they focus on understanding specific situations that occur in the classroom (e.g., story time, time to wash their hands, etc.), so that they can decipher sounds, grammatical patterns, and the meaning of English. This process can interfere in





When children hear words of comfort and support from adults in their primary language, they feel more secure and are more willing to take risks learning a new language.

ELLs primary language development and delay important cognitive and school readiness skills in their primary language. According to literacy expert Linda Espinosa, “For young children who are actively processing and have not yet mastered the elements of their first language, completely shifting from their first language too early may have a negative effect on English fluency and academic achievement during the PK-3 Years” (2008, p. 5).

Thus, as Espinosa explains, it is a “myth” that total English immersion in pre-K through third grade is the best way for young ELLs to learn English (2008). Though it may seem like “common sense” that the more children hear and speak English, the faster they will become fluent, this is not, in fact, the case, as Espinosa explains: “While English can be successfully introduced during the preschool years, if it replaces the home language, and children do not have the opportunity to continue to learn in the language they know, their future linguistic, conceptual, and academic development in English is at risk” (p. 5).

Similarly, the 2006 report “Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth” makes it clear that instructional programs for English language learners work best when students have

opportunities for students to develop proficiency in their first language. According to the report, studies comparing bilingual instruction and English-only instruction “demonstrate that language minority students instructed in the native language as well as in English perform better, on average, on measures of English reading proficiency than language minority students instructed only in English” (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 11).

How can children perform well in school if they are still not fluent in English?

Although the use of primary language instruction is a topic of much debate, rigorous research has found that “English learners who received bilingual education performed at least as well, and often better, on standardized tests in English than similar children taught in English-only programs,” according to researcher and cultural studies expert Laurie Olsen. Research in dual language acquisition actually affirms that children are able to transfer the knowledge of language and literacy skills from their home language to a second language). As Olsen explains, “Literacy skills are not language specific; they can be learned in one language and transferred to another language, drawing upon a common cognitive base” (p. 3). Thus, as educator and literacy expert Claude Goldenberg explains, “...If you learn something in one language — such as decoding, comprehension strategies, or a concept such as democracy — you either already know it in (i.e., transfer it to) another language or can more easily learn it in another language” (2008, p. 15). For example, English language learners can use information from a particular activity (e.g., looking at pictures of different pets with the teacher) and connect that information with what they already know (e.g., “I have a puppy at home”). Just as native English speakers take advantage of contextual cues to learn new vocabulary words, ELL students can adopt similar strategies. For example, while looking at the pictures of the puppy, a child, regardless of his

or her first language, can understand and begin to recognize words such as *bark*, *wag*, and *tail*. The bigger the child’s vocabulary in his or her home language, the easier it is for the child to pick up vocabulary words in the second language. Likewise, if a child has begun decoding letter-sound connections in the home language, he or she can apply this same rule to letter-sound connections in English. While this is easier when both languages use the same alphabet (such as English and Spanish), the general rule can be applied to different alphabets (such as English and Arabic). The same applies to learning the principles of grammar and syntax, that is, the specifics may vary with the language (such as whether an adjective precedes or follows a noun), but the idea that there are rules transfers from the first to the second language (Tabors, 2008).

When children have not yet mastered their first language, shifting to total English immersion puts their future linguistic and academic development at risk.

When ELL children learn skills in both languages, they use that information to accelerate their overall literacy learning. As a child living in a country (Chile) where Spanish was the primary language, English was my home language and I learned to read Spanish at school. At home, my mother read books to me in English, and I can remember following and reading the words as she read them to me. I learned basic concepts about how books and print work in general (for example, books are read from front to back, the words go from left to right, and certain sounds are associated with certain letters). This foundational knowledge helped me with my literacy learning at school. The reverse also held true. With time I began to transfer my knowledge of reading in

Building Literacy Skills Through Music

Music offers us a natural way to teach children *through* language rather than teach language *to* children. Because music activities typically occur during large-group times, young ELL children not only have the opportunity to express themselves through music (KDI 41) (and often, movement, KDI 42), they also participate in the community of the classroom (KDI 11) through a shared experience, which fosters a sense of group membership. According to literacy expert Patton Tabors (1997), “Frequently, second-language learners ‘find their voice’ or ‘go public’ for the first time in their new language as they are singing songs during circle time” (p. 125). Trying out new words in a group situation is also less stressful for English language learners than using the words in conversation with a peer or teacher.

When singing songs in English, “Teachers should include songs and movement with highly predictable components and should introduce the words of the song first without the music so that the second-language learning children have an opportunity to catch on more quickly” (1997, p. 125). “Giving children many opportunities to return to their favorite songs also reinforces their learning,” notes Tabors. When we use songs in the children’s home language, we can accelerate their learning by using

the knowledge they have gained about their first language to teach critical early literacy skills they will need to be ready for school. Using songs in another language to teach, however, challenges us to learn and build a repertoire of traditional and classic songs in the home language of the children that are represented in our classrooms. This may initially seem like an overwhelming task. How can we learn songs in another language? In fact, it is not as hard as one might think!

We can begin by inviting parents and other family members to share the songs they sing at home with the children in our classrooms. Parents can visit the center and volunteer to teach a song, or they can donate a CD they use at home; this is important because it provides language continuity between home and center for children who do not speak English. If we incorporate these songs into the daily routine, we send the message that we are interested in learning to speak the language children know. They can become the teachers of their language as we teach them ours. This strategy allows us to look at language as an asset rather than a deficit. If families cannot directly be a resource, we can search in the community (e.g., churches, community centers, chambers of commerce volunteers, and family friends), or we can go to the Internet. There is a

Music activities during large-group time give English language learners the opportunity to “find their voice” in their new language and to have a shared experience with other members of their classroom community.



wealth of children's music from around the world online that we can explore. People all over the world have used music for years to learn English; we can use this same technique to learn songs in Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, French, Japanese, and other languages. Exploring the Internet can be an easy and very accessible way to build a repertoire of songs.

As we think about investing time learning songs from other cultures and language, let us imagine ourselves as Spanish language learners, and let's reflect on how we can use our knowledge of English to learn the following song in Spanish. First, read the following sentences in Spanish using the pronunciation highlighted in red if you cannot read Spanish. Use the picture clues    to understand the meaning of some words in the song; reread the words in the song until you are comfortable with the pronunciation, and finally reread the words using the melody for "Twinkle, twinkle, little star."



Once children become familiar with the words and melody of a song, adults can use the same song to teach other literacy skills, such as letters and letter sounds.

Buenos días cómo están, todos mis  hoy?
 Booh nos dee ahs, coh moh ehs tahn, toh dohs mees ah mee gohs oee

Vamos todos a  vamos todos a 
 Vah mohs toh dohs ah cahn tahr, vah Mohs toh dohs ah bah ee lahr,

Buenos días cómo están, todos mis  hoy?
 Booh nos dee ahs, coh moh ehs tahn, toh dohs mees ah mee gohs oee

What knowledge of the English language did you use to pronounce words and read the song? How were you able to comprehend the meaning in the song? How did you know how to read the song?

Now that we have transferred our knowledge of English and our personal experience to learn this song, let's read the actual translation. As we do this, we will increase our understanding of the words:

*Good morning, how are all of my friends today?
 Let us all sing together, let us all dance together.
 Good morning, how are all of my friends today?*

Once children are familiar with the words and the melody, we can use this same song to teach other early literacy skills, including letters and letter sounds. For example, make a class song book so that children can see the words they've learned to sing written on the page and begin to associate the sounds with the letters. We can develop awareness of how sounds rhyme in another language, and extend their understanding of different patterns of speech. If some of the home languages of the children in the classroom use a different alphabet, we can choose meaningful words (e.g. *mommy* or *daddy*), and extend children's knowledge about how people write in other cultures. We can also ask parents to help children learn the translated version of the names of children in the classroom (e.g., *Mary* is *Maria*, *Peter* is *Pedro*) and offer additional extensions by showing how we use other alphabet symbols to write the names of some of the friends in

the classroom (e.g., with examples from Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, etc.) We can encourage children to substitute their names in familiar songs, for example (in the above song): *Good morning, how is Maria (Ibrahim, Jacques, Zongping, and so on) today.*

Finally, if we use songs that represent the diversity of culture and language in our classrooms, we will not only support language and literacy experiences for ELL children but we can extend this learning of culture and language to all of the other children in the classroom. All children can learn songs in Spanish, Arabic, French, Chinese, and other languages to develop an awareness of cultural traditions that extend beyond their own. When we incorporate parents and extended family to help us learn traditional children's songs we enrich our classrooms and help children develop an understanding of cultural diversity. When we use music to embrace language diversity in our classrooms, we experience advantages that go beyond learning how to speak a language. Young ELL children gain language fluency and school readiness skills and develop a stronger sense of their cultural identity. All the children and adults in the classroom increase their knowledge of literacy in more than one language, and everyone gains a deeper understanding of diverse cultures, having fun in the process!

For additional strategies to incorporate music into literacy learning, see *Making Connections: Movement, Music, and Literacy* (Haraksin-Probst, Hutson-Brandhagen, & Weikart, 2008).



Interactions between children who speak the primary language of the classroom and those who are not yet proficient support the linguistic, social, and cognitive development of all of the children.

Spanish (learned at school) into English (used at home) and taught myself how to read and write in English. When children use more than one language to process information, they develop greater metalinguistic awareness and use this information to enhance communication and cognitive learning (Baker, 2000). Recent research indicates that learning two languages may, in fact, benefit the brain by increasing the density of brain tissue in areas related to language, memory, and attention (Mechelli et al., 2004). These effects apply to English speakers as well!

How can we support children’s primary language if we do not speak the language?

It is important to set the right tone if we are interested in making language diversity an integral part of the classroom. One way we can help children to feel accepted and experience continuity between the home environment and the early learning setting is to ask family members to teach us 10 to 15 words and a few one- or two-word sentences we can use to communicate with children starting on their first day in the classroom. These words can include components of the daily routine (e.g., *circle time, snacktime, outside time*) and one-word questions related to children’s basic needs (e.g., “Hungry?”; “Tired?”; “Bathroom?”). It is important to follow the children’s lead and interests and to be attentive to the kinds of things they need to communicate to us; it is important that we learn words in children’s primary language to offer them comfort and support. Knowing adults are avail-

able to meet their needs, children are more willing to take risks learning a new language. Parents will also be reassured their children are being well cared for in an environment that differs culturally, as well as linguistically, from home (Rogoff, 2003).

The next step is for us to help children feel that the process of learning language is a joint effort. As we show interest in learning words from a child’s primary language, to use during the daily routine, we show that we value their language, their culture, and their home. Learning one’s language is critical to a child’s developing sense of self and identity (see KDI 7) and vital to his or her connection to family, culture, and community (Cavaluzzi, 2010). In its position statement “Where We Stand On Responding to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity” (2009), the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) makes several recommendations to programs working with young ELL children, including the following:

- “Ensure that children remain cognitively, linguistically, and emotionally connected to their home language and culture.
- Encourage home language and literacy development, knowing that this contributes to children’s ability to acquire English language proficiency.
- Help develop essential concepts in the children’s first language and within culture contexts that they understand.” (2009, p. 1)

NAEYC also stresses the importance of actively involving families in the early learning setting, providing them with strategies to maintain the home language, and making certain they know their values and practices are honored in the classroom.

Teaching Practices for Supporting Language and Literacy

The most effective high-quality preschool programs “support and build upon a child’s home language, and provide intentional support and access to opportunities to learn in both the home

language and in English” (Olsen, 2006, p. 2). The HighScope Curriculum provides an ideal framework through which we can integrate children’s primary language throughout the daily routine, and, in fact, HighScope has a specific key developmental indicator (KDI), with corresponding teaching strategies, devoted to English Language Learning (KDI 30) (Epstein, 2012). We can build vocabulary through small-group activities, outdoor games, and large-group times (see sidebar, pp. 8–9). We can communicate language and meaning nonverbally, using pantomime, pointing, and role play. We can use pretend play to expand the vocabulary of ELL children and use narrative to enhance their fluency (see related article on p. 18). According to Ann S. Epstein, “To encourage language use in all its forms, sing songs, read books and tell stories from children’s home languages as well as English during group times. Encourage them to share familiar songs, fairy tales, and rhymes they hear at home, and to teach them to you and their classmates” (2012, p. 138). These practices will support both the retention of the child’s primary language as well as the

Recent research indicates that learning two languages may, in fact, benefit the brain in areas related to language, memory, and attention.

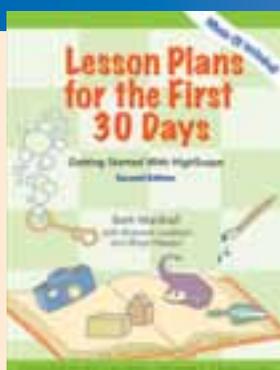
acquisition of English.

For more ideas on working effectively with ELL children, see *Language, Literacy, and Communication* (Epstein, 2012, pp. 133–142). For ideas on how to support language, literacy, and communication in general, see the *Growing Readers Early Literacy Curriculum* (HighScope, 2005) and other literacy resources listed on the HighScope website at www.highscope.org. ■

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