

Elizabeth S. Magruder,
Whitcomb W. Hayslip,
Linda M. Espinosa,
and Carola Matera



Many Languages, One Teacher: Supporting Language and Literacy Development for Preschool Dual Language Learners

While children in a classroom of 4-year-olds are actively engaged during center-based learning, a small group begins constructing a tower using blocks of all sizes. This is a specific structure the group decided to make after listening to a nonfiction book—*Structures*, by Time-Life Books—about all sizes and types of structures. As the group begins building, Mrs. Blakley observes the interactions and listens to the following dialogue:

José: We make a scraper.

Thomas: Like a skyscraper! We have to make it tall. Keep putting more blocks.

José: Yeah, make it tall—like a scraper. *(The three children each add blocks to the tower until it almost reaches their shoulders, and it begins to fall over.)*

Cindy: Oh, no! Too high! Too high!

Thomas: We have to put blocks down here to make it strong.

Cindy: Let's make it strong! Strong tower!

José: Strong scraper!

Thomas: If we don't make it strong, the skyscraper will fall!

JOSÉ, CINDY, AND THOMAS ARE ALL AT DIFFERENT stages of language development. José is a dual language learner (DLL) in the early stages of English language acquisition; Cindy is a DLL who speaks both Spanish and English at home; and Thomas is a native English speaker. From this interaction, Mrs. Blakley (a fictitious teacher, based on the authors' observations of numerous practitioners in the field) learns that this small group activity provides the time, space, and materials for the children to understand and practice key vocabulary through engaging and meaningful play. This observation will guide her future decisions about targeted instruction for language development. It also sparks some essential questions about José in particular:

- How much home language does José bring with him?
- What kinds of language-learning exposure and opportunities does José experience at home?
- How can José's knowledge in his home language be activated and applied to the task of learning English?
- How can Mrs. Blakley, a monolingual English-speaking teacher, promote José's growth in both English language development and maintaining home language skills?

Mrs. Blakley's classroom is culturally and linguistically diverse, representing more than five different languages and ethnicities. While some of the children have been identified as DLLs, Mrs. Blakley has determined through ongoing observation and child assessments that most of the children will need focused support in language development. She needs to intentionally design lessons, activities, and interactions that capitalize on the linguistic knowledge the children bring with them while she systematically fosters English language development.

Dual language learning

The US Census Bureau projects that by the 2030s, children whose home language is other than English will increase from roughly 22 percent to 40 percent of the school-age population. The numbers are growing even more rapidly for the preschool years due to increasing immigration and birth rates (Center for Public Education 2012). The diversity of languages and ethnicities entering early education

programs is growing as well, with more than 200 different languages currently represented in California public schools (CCDD 2009).

Because DLLs represent a growing proportion of pre-K–12 children, and their educational achievement has consistently lagged behind their native English-speaking peers, improving the conditions of DLLs' early schooling and their long-term educational attainment is an urgent concern to educators at all levels (Espinosa 2010). The weight of current research indicates that becoming proficient in two languages is both possible for and beneficial to young children; bilingual preschoolers have shown increased cognitive, linguistic, and social-emotional advantages (Bialystok 2008; Kuhl 2009). Two research synthesis reports, published in 2006 by the National Literacy Panel and the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence, find that DLLs benefit from instruction that focuses on decoding and comprehension in English. The reports also conclude that a strong home-language base makes it easier to learn English, and that young children can learn two languages as naturally as learning one (August & Shanahan 2006; Genesee 2010; Castro, Ayankoya, & Kasprzak 2011).

Unless teachers and family members make an effort to support both the home language and English, young DLLs can easily lose the ability to speak and understand their home language, or lose the balance between the two languages (Puig 2010; Castro, Ayankoya, & Kasprzak 2011). If young children lose the language of their home, they will never experience the many advantages of becoming fully bilingual. They might find communicating with elder family members difficult and feel less connected to their family traditions and heritage. This disconnect can lead to emotional and self-esteem concerns as DLLs approach adolescence (Wong Fillmore 1991).

For all these reasons, supporting and encouraging dual language learning in young children makes sense and is crucial to their long-term success.

Language and communication

Children, when provided a safe, nurturing, and culturally and linguistically responsive environment in which to learn, communicate their experiences and discoveries in a multitude of ways.

About the Authors

Elizabeth S. Magruder, MEd, is an educational consultant supporting early childhood education programs throughout California. Elizabeth has worked on multiple projects that focus on dual language learners, stemming from her 22 years of teaching and coaching experience. esmagruder@gmail.com

Whitcomb W. Hayslip, MA, is an independent consultant supporting a number of early childhood education projects throughout

California. He previously served as the assistant superintendent, early childhood education, for the Los Angeles Unified School District. whitcomb.hayslip@gmail.com

Linda M. Espinosa, PhD, is the coprincipal investigator for the Center for Early Care and Education Research–Dual Language Learners at Frank Porter Graham CDI at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and lead consultant for the Best Practices for Young Dual Language Learners Project at the California State

Department of Education, Child Development Division. espinosal@missouri.edu

Carola Matera, PhD, is an assistant professor of early childhood studies at California State University Channel Islands. Carola has worked on topics related to teaching and supporting young dual language learners' learning and development. carola.matera@csuci.edu

This article is available at www.naeyc.org/yc. A study guide for this article is available through www.naeyc.org/memberlogin.

The more interesting and interactive the conversations are that children take part in, the more language they learn. Reading books, singing, playing word games, and simply talking to and with children builds their vocabulary while providing increased opportunities to develop listening skills. Children learn by engaging in daily interactions and experiences with peers and skilled adults. Between the ages of 4 and 5, many children enter preschool or kindergarten programs, making language competency vital for navigating and participating in the classroom community. DLLs come to us with richly varied backgrounds, sets of skills, and cultural ways of knowing: they need teachers who welcome them and recognize their unique abilities, what they know, and what they need to learn. Teachers of young DLLs understand that children communicate their knowledge using the safest method possible, and this may mean the use of their home language, English, or a mixture of both.

Mrs. Blakley elicits the help of community volunteers to support dual language learners. Her classroom reflects the children's languages and cultures with greetings, alphabets, and key phrases written in each child's home language. The environmental print reflects child-created labels; a library corner features literature in various home languages; and cozy learning spaces allow children to interact around interesting and familiar topics.

Personalized Oral Language(s) Learning

Early childhood educators understand that oral language development is a critical component of later reading success. While teachers employ numerous strategies and approaches to support oral language development, it can be challenging to provide targeted attention to each child. Curriculum and lesson planning provide guidance on the *what* and the *when* of teaching, but rarely on the *how*. How can we, as teachers, personalize oral language experiences for children, especially DLLs? How can we expand and enrich what we teach



and, at the same time, give children multiple opportunities throughout the day to practice? What strategies can we use consistently, as part of the daily routine, to broaden and enhance oral language development? What should these enhancements be and how can we integrate them into lesson plans and long-range goals?

While working with groups of teachers supporting dual language learners in California, the authors recognized the critical need to both provide more intensive and individualized support in oral language development to all children and explicitly help DLLs apply what they already know about language to the task of learning English. To meet this need, three of the authors, in collaboration with Whitcomb Hayslip, the district administrator at the time, designed Personalized Oral Language(s) Learning (POLL) for the Los Angeles Unified School District. This program gives teachers a specific set of strategies and practices to increase the effectiveness of language and literacy instruction for all young children, but with a focus on young DLLs. The developers derived the POLL features by evaluating current

research on best practices for literacy instruction in general, and then designing a fine-tuned approach that focuses on oral language learning in young children, especially dual language learners.

Components of POLL

1. Families first

When teachers and families connect early on *and* in person, they establish a common goal to support the child both at home and in school. Families and teachers together are champions for the child and share responsibility in supporting language and learning goals.

Family languages and interests interview. The purpose of this interview is for families to tell teachers about their children's home language practices, talents, and interests, to better connect family, teacher, and child, and to promote home-school connections. The interview is conducted in person during the first weeks of school as a way to welcome families, establish a rapport, and discuss some shared language and learning goals. The information gathered provides the framework for inviting families into the preschool setting, as well as preparing environmental and teaching supports early on, such as displaying relevant cultural artifacts and providing books and materials written in children's home languages.

2. Environmental supports

The classroom's physical environment sets the stage for active and engaged learning. It conveys a crucial message to children that they will be safe, nurtured, and valued. It is important for the design and layout of the classroom to offer established learning spaces that engage children's interest and promote conversations in both large and small groups.

Physical environment is nurturing and engaging. Look at the environment through the eyes of the child. Think about colors, learning spaces, supplies, furniture, accessibility, warmth. Is it child centered, cocreated, inviting, user-friendly, interesting, and safe? Can children *actively* participate in all learning areas? For example, can the classroom rug (where children gather for whole group experience) later be used for play-based learning with building blocks?

Learning centers support and promote conversations around exploration and discovery and are linked to study themes. Intentionally plan and prepare centers to achieve targeted language and learning goals. These areas evolve as children evolve. Teachers are observers and facilitators while children interact. Use center time as

an opportunity to both engage with children and provide language support in the moment, while listening to and observing what children say and do.

Print-rich labeling is visible and represents all home languages. Label areas and supplies in English and children's home languages. For monolingual English-speaking teachers, learning words and phrases in home languages fosters a collaborative and culturally responsive classroom community in which all children are valued. When learning key words in home languages, invite children to cocreate and help write the labels!

Books, materials, displays, and artifacts reflect all languages, cultures, families, and communities of children. Showcase books (library corner), artifacts, and materials (featured exhibit/discovery table) in areas where children can gather to explore. Encourage children and families to bring in relevant artifacts and materials to share.

3. Instructional supports

Integrate POLL strategies throughout the day and provide extended activities across contexts to reinforce children's learning of new concepts and vocabulary, placing the emphasis on children's experiences.

Intentional message: A written message, with embedded content vocabulary, that sets the purpose of each lesson, and is on display where children can see it and refer to it.

The message can be prewritten or cowritten with the children, depending on the instructional purpose, such as a shared writing or interactive writing session. Think about preteaching (teaching concepts in advance) the words in home languages to support concept development (e.g., *amigos* [friends], *cantar* [to sing]).

Example: During circle time: "Welcome, **friends**! I am happy to see you. I like to **sing**. What do you like to do?"

During math time: "Today we will be **mathematicians** and **explore** which **group** of blocks has **more**."

What Mrs. Blakley learned: "The intentional message provides a framework for the content and lesson I am about to teach. It gives the children a goal that the whole class will work on during that day. They know what to expect, and it's another way for them to process the vocabulary words that are central to understanding that day's lessons."

Anchor text: A picture book, selected intentionally and used repetitively to foster vocabulary and concept development.

Teachers can use an anchor text in multiple ways and for many purposes with dual language learners. The following suggestions are ways to support DLLs' language and literacy development using the anchor text as a tool.

- Choose 3–5 key vocabulary words from a picture book to introduce throughout the week. Learning these key words in children’s home languages before reading the book in class will help build the comprehension connection. With dual language learners, preteach the text and vocabulary (in home languages and English) in small groups before introducing it to the whole class.
- Implement reading strategies with DLLs (e.g., *dialogic reading*—a read-aloud that includes brief interactions between the teacher and the children), one-on-one or in small groups (no more than two), to prepare for whole group reading.
- Seek support from parents or community volunteers to assist with home language needs.

My songs and chants tend to rhyme because this age group responds so enthusiastically to those sound patterns.

- Remember that picture books can be adapted and read in any language!

Example: Before introducing an anchor text to the whole class, one or two days in advance ask a small group of dual language learners to teach you key words in their language. This bridges concepts and language learning while providing context and meaning for the upcoming lesson.

What Mrs. Blakley learned: “I usually have three or four key books in mind when I teach a particular unit or concept. My directed lessons took place during and after reading the book with the whole class. I often supported dual language learners in the moment or after whole group and rarely used *home language bridging*, in which a recognized concept in the home language is transferred to English. I learned that in planning and preparing ahead of time, DLLs can actively participate in whole group activities with more confidence, having spent concentrated time with me or a community volunteer beforehand. This is so important for their self-esteem and for their language acquisition.”

Vocabulary imprinting: The use of photographs, images, and word walls to introduce new concepts and vocabulary and deepen comprehension.

Example: Photographs with labels, recipes, magazine cutouts, children’s photos or drawings from home, vocabulary walls, cognate walls (displaying words in two languages that share a similar meaning, spelling, and pronunciation).

What Mrs. Blakley learned: “I used to post vocabulary words on the wall with a picture next to it for display, and the children and I would refer to it often. Now I make it more interactive. I learn key words ahead of time in the children’s home languages and make a list of cognates. In our lessons, we cocreate a list of cognates and benefit from

seeing patterns and connecting words in multiple languages. I now have key words and photos in a pocket chart so children can come up at any time during the day, pull them out, and work with them interactively.”

Visual cues/gestures: Physical movements, repeated to imprint meaning as specific content vocabulary is introduced.

Example: Choose movements/gestures for a few key words only, and repeatedly use these gestures throughout the day and week so that children begin to link the gestures with words and concepts. For example, with the key word *explore*, the gesture could be to extend a flat hand up to your eyebrows and look back and forth.

What Mrs. Blakley learned: “Using gestures and movements for key words really makes learning fun! All children can participate. I went a bit overboard at first with pairing gestures to many words and found that it was too much for us to remember. Choosing a few movements for the more difficult words was more effective. We used the gestures more frequently and it helped the children learn and understand meaning in a deeper way.”

Songs/chants: Content vocabulary woven into familiar songs and chants to encourage repetition.

Example: The “More” chant.

Key vocabulary: More, greater, bigger, few, less.

More means greater and greater means more.

More is bigger than ever before!

More is many while few is less.

More is a lot—no need to guess!

More means greater and greater means more.

More is bigger than ever before!

What Mrs. Blakley learned: “Children love music and movement, and I find I use it all day long and for many different purposes. What I didn’t realize at first is that I could teach strategic vocabulary with it. When I create chants and songs using key words that we are working on, it is another way the children can learn new words. My songs and chants tend to rhyme because this age group responds so enthusiastically to those sound patterns.”

Center extensions: Planned center-based opportunities for independent and/or small group practice. These are child directed and teacher facilitated.

Example: After teaching a math lesson using bear counters and work mats, place these materials in the math center to allow children time and space to explore concepts on their own and collaboratively. This encourages practice and repetition, while fostering problem solving, interaction, and rich discussion.

What Mrs. Blakley learned: “I look at center time as an opportunity for the children to interact with each other and



talk, talk, talk! I observe and facilitate conversations around learning and, most important, I listen! The dual language learners get so much out of this time. They have the opportunity to work with same-language friends and English-speaking models. It is a much more enriching experience now.”

Conclusion

By integrating the foundational elements of POLL in her daily planning, Mrs. Blakley is able to deepen her teaching practices and strengthen her connection with families. The focus on personalizing oral language interactions provides all the children with more language learning opportunities while supporting the dual language learners in a deeper and more connected approach. She says, “I am able to observe and make intentional modifications for José and Cindy. With POLL planning, I know what my next steps will be for them.”

Mrs. Blakley has found ways to elicit support for DLLs from community volunteers and parents who assist from home and in the classroom: “I now have additional tools and a more thoughtful approach to strengthen and support their language needs, which make teaching vocabulary and comprehension so meaningful and fun! Children feel appreciated, safe, valued. I feel good knowing I have ways

to better support multiple languages in the classroom, even though I speak only English.”

Intentionality in goal setting, planning, instruction, and observation is critical. While the commitment of teachers to plan strategically for all children, especially dual language learners, requires thoughtful planning and continuous preparation, the enhanced personal connections and increased language learning opportunities help the classroom come alive for both children and teachers.

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