Coming Together: Identifying Dual Language Learner Competencies for Early Childhood Educators

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Over 3 million children ages five and younger live in California. Compared to other states, two times as many of these children are first- or second-generation immigrants living in families whose home language is other than English (Stipek & Pizzo, 2018). These children, who comprise about 60 percent of this age group in California, are characterized as dual language learners (DLLs) (MPI, 2020). Bilingualism has cognitive, social-emotional, and economic benefits for children and society (Kroll & Dussias, 2017). In order for DLLs to benefit from being bilingual, it is vital for them to have substantial support to continue developing their home languages while learning English.

Numerous studies have noted the correlation between the quality of preschool education and children's cognitive and social-emotional development (Nores & Barnett, 2014; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). High-quality early education benefits all children; however, the benefits are even greater for DLLs and children with low socioeconomic status and disabilities (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Despite the importance of high-quality early care and education for young children, California has low and patchy teacher-training requirements for early childhood education (ECE) programs, and the process for monitoring quality is fragmented and inadequate (Stipek, 2018).

The effective use of curricula and stimulating and supportive interactions between educators and children are the most important aspects of quality in ECE (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). For DLLs, it is crucial for ECE educators to obtain competencies to work with linguistically and culturally diverse children. However, ECE educators in California do not receive sufficient training to work with DLLs (Zepeda et al., 2011), and higher education faculty do not feel they have enough knowledge or resources to teach how to best support DLLs and their families (Navarro-Cruz, Leon, & Crolotte, in publication).

Purpose
In an effort to provide a guide for faculty and teacher preparation programs on how to best support DLLs in the classroom, faculty (both in a two-year and four-year institution), policy advocates, and school administrators came together to develop and map out DLL teacher competencies. Our works build upon Zepeda, Castro, and Cronin (2011) and Zepeda and Espinosa (2020) DLL educator competencies. We expanded on these competencies and included a guide on how these competencies could be implemented at the introductory, developing, and master levels. (See Table 1.)

Collaborative Work
This work was funded by the Early Educators Investment Collaborative (https://tinyurl.com/EarlyEdCollab) through the Universities & Partners, Learning, Innovating, Fostering Equity, Transforming California ECE Degrees (https://tinyurl.com/UP-LIFT) grant. One of the main objectives of the grant was to ensure that ECE educator candidates have the pedagogical and family engagement skills needed to support dual language learners (DLLs) to develop both English and home-language proficiency as appropriate to young children's developmental levels.

The key transformative approach to accomplishing this objective was to include all relevant partners in the process. ECE educator candidates often begin at the community college in Child Development or Early Childhood Education Programs, then transfer to a four-year university to complete their Baccalaureate. Finally, these students will enter the workforce in a school district or center. All partners (two-year faculty, four-year faculty, and school district administrators) worked together along with Early Edge California, an advocacy organization, to create DLL competencies that one would expect early educator candidates should have. We would be able to assess these competencies at introductory levels at the community

college, developing levels at the university, and mastering levels in the workforce. The collaborative nature of this work allows faculty and teacher preparation programs to ensure that teacher candidates have the skills needed once they enter the workforce.

Table 1. Comprehensive Dual Language Learner Competencies

Competency	Introducing	Developing	Mastering
1. Develop a strengths-based perspective toward culturally and linguistically diverse children and families through continuous reflective practices on self-beliefs, biases, and assumptions of linguistically and culturally diverse families.	Identify reflective strategies to obtain a strengths-based perspective toward culturally and linguistically diverse children and families.	Explain reflective strategies to obtain a strengths-based perspective toward culturally and linguistically diverse children and families.	Develop a strengths-based perspective toward culturally and linguistically diverse children and families through continuous reflective practices on self-beliefs, biases, and assumptions of linguistically and culturally diverse families.
2. Describe the linguistic development of monolingual and bilingual children using various theories and research on bi/multilingualism.	Identify the common linguistic development of monolingual and bilingual children using various theories and research on bi/multilingualism.	Identify the distinctive linguistic development of monolingual and bilingual children using various theories and research on bi/multilingualism.	Describe how linguistic development of monolingual and bilingual children vary using various theories and research on bi/multilingualism.
3. Apply strategies and practices that support linguistically and culturally diverse children and families within different program models, approaches, and settings.	Identify strategies and practices that support linguistically and culturally diverse children and families within different program models, approaches, and settings.	Analyze various approaches and practices that support linguistically and culturally diverse children and families within different program models, approaches, and settings.	Implement approaches and practices that support linguistically and culturally diverse children and families within different program models, approaches, and settings.
4. Develop family partnerships using a funds-of-knowledge framework that values the linguistic, cultural, and racial diversity of children and families.	Identify the importance of family partnerships and how to use their funds of knowledge to value the linguistic, cultural, and racial diversity of children and families.	Analyze diverse ways to nurture family partnerships and how to use their funds of knowledge to value the linguistic, cultural, and racial diversity of children and families.	Develop family partnerships and how to use their funds of knowledge to value the linguistic, cultural, and racial diversity of children and families.
5. Create a welcoming environment that supports the cultural, linguistic, racial, cognitive, and social-emotional development of children.	Identify certain environmental factors that welcome the cultural, linguistic, racial, cognitive, and social-emotional development of children.	Analyze diverse environments and how they support the cultural, linguistic, racial, cognitive, and social-emotional development of children.	Design an environment that supports children's and families' cultural, linguistic, racial, cognitive, and social-emotional development of children
6. Design and implement curriculum based on research, pedagogical strategies, and practices that take into consideration children's funds of knowledge, diverse abilities (including cognitive and social-emotional), culture(s), language(s), and race(s).	Identify different curricular approaches that utilize children's funds of knowledge, diverse abilities, culture(s), language(s), and race(s).	Analyze diverse curricular approaches that are inclusive and how to design an inclusive curriculum that utilizes children's funds of knowledge, diverse abilities, culture(s), language(s), and race(s).	Design and implement various curricular approaches that utilize children's funds of knowledge, diverse abilities, culture(s), language(s), and race(s).
7. Perform observations and assessments that are culturally and linguistically appropriate for children from birth to eight.	Obtain information about how to observe and assess children who are multilingual.	Practice using observation and assessments that are culturally and linguistically appropriate for children from birth to eight (not necessarily directly working with children).	Perform an observation and assessment that is culturally and linguistically appropriate for children from birth to eight (directly working with children).
8. Collaborate with colleagues, families, and community stakeholders to best support the development and learning of linguistically, culturally, and racially diverse children.	Identify the role of families and community stakeholders in supporting culturally and linguistically diverse children and families.	Reflect and examine how to partner with families and communities to better support linguistically and culturally diverse children.	Communicate and collaborate with families and stakeholders to support culturally and linguistically diverse children and families.

Next Steps

The competencies were designed to be used from the beginning of an early educational preparation program at a community college, through an ECE baccalaureate program, and finally in the classroom. An Observation Tool is currently being created and will be piloted by both community colleges and four-year universities to assess the DLL competencies of teacher candidates in their classroom practicum experience. Furthermore, alignment between specific higher education courses and competency levels will be developed. Plans to align to the Teaching Performance Expectations (TPEs) and PK-3 Standards will also be developed with the goal of showing how the DLL competencies fit within the established teacher competencies and expectations (https://tinyurl.com/CTC-3H-info).

Knowing the competencies that educator candidates should have can assist in preparing them to work with our youngest learners. Aligning the DLL competencies with the curriculum across community colleges and universities is important to ensure programs are working together to prepare teacher candidates for the workforce. Alignment also includes coordination with teacher performance expectations or standards in school districts or centers. Key to developing the DLL competencies was the collaboration of two-year Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) faculty, four-year IHE faculty, school district administrators, and policy advocates. Our vision is for all ECE teachers to obtain the competencies to work with DLL children and their families. ◼

References are included in the appendix of the online version: https://tinyurl.com/2023onlineME.