Young English Language Learners in the U.S.

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Learning to speak and use language to communicate is a major task of the preschool years. Within the first few years of life, virtually all typically developing children master the basics of one language. Although this is a complex task that requires much effort, early **language proficiency** is expected and considered normal. Increasingly, in the United States, young children are in learning environments where more than one language is used. Internationally, it is estimated that there are as many children who grow up learning two languages as one. The number of children enrolled in preschool and Head Start programs whose home language is not English (English-language learners, ELL) has been steadily increasing over the past two decades. During 2002-2003, 27% of children enrolled in Head Start did not speak English as their home language. Of these, the vast majority are from Spanish-speaking homes with 139 other language groups also reported. Due to immigration trends and child-bearing rates of Latina women, the number of Latino children as a proportion of all young children has also been steadily increasing. Currently, Hispanics make up about 26% of all children under the age of three.

Will Two Languages Help or Hurt Young Children?

Research increasingly shows that most young children are not only capable of learning two languages; studies also support the belief that bilingualism confers cognitive, cultural, and economic advantages (Bialystok, 2001; Genesee, 2004; Hakuta & Pease-Alvarez, 1992). Bilingualism has been associated with a greater awareness of and sensitivity to linguistic structure, an awareness that is transferred and generalized to certain early literacy and nonverbal skills There are

several important implications of this research for early childhood professionals. Children who have the opportunity to speak two languages should be encouraged to maintain both, so they can enjoy the benefits that may accompany bilingual status. Children from homes where English is not the native language should be encouraged to cultivate their home language as well as learn English. Maintaining the home language is essential not just to the child's future academic and cognitive development, but also to the child's ability to establish a strong cultural identity, to develop and sustain strong ties with their immediate and extended families, and to thrive in a global, multilingual world.

How Do Children Learn a Second Language?

It is commonly assumed that preschool-aged children can just "pick up" a second language without much effort or systematic teaching. However, becoming proficient in a language is a complex and demanding process that takes many years. As with any type of learning, children will vary enormously in the rate at which they learn a first and a second language. The speed of language acquisition is due to factors both within the child and in the child's learning environment. The child's personality, aptitude for languages, interest and motivation interact with the quantity and quality of language inputs and opportunities for use to influence the rate and eventual fluency levels.

Simultaneous vs. Sequential Second Language Acquisition

Barry McLaughlin (1984, 1995) has made a distinction between children who learn a second language *simultaneously* or *sequentially*. When a child learns two languages *simultaneously*, e.g. before three years of age, the developmental pathway is similar to how monolingual children acquire language. However, there is some disagreement in the literature over whether bilingualism results in a slower rate of vocabulary development than when children are learning a single language. As children are in the process of acquiring two languages and becoming bilingual, one language may dominate. That is normal. It is rare for emerging bilinguals to be equally balanced in the development of both languages.

Eventually, however, children who have the opportunity to acquire two languages simultaneously will become proficient in each language.

The language development of children who learn a second language after three years of age, or *sequentially*, follows a different progression and is highly sensitive to characteristics of the child as well as the language learning environment. At this point, the basics of the child's first language have been learned. They know the structure of one language, but now must learn the specific features, grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, of a new language. According to Tabors and Snow (1994), *sequential* second language acquisition follows a four stage developmental sequence:

1. *Home Language Use*. When a child has become competent in one language and is introduced into a setting where everyone is speaking a different language, e.g. an ELL entering an English-dominant preschool classroom, the child will frequently continue to speak his home language even when others do not understand. This period can be short or in some cases the child will persist in trying to get others to understand him for months.
2. *Nonverbal Period*. After young children realize that speaking their home language will not work, they enter a period where they rarely speak and use nonverbal means to communicate. This is a period of active language learning for the child; he is busy leaning the features, sounds, and words of the new language (receptive language) but is not yet verbally using the new language to communicate. This is an extremely important stage of second language learning that may also last a long time or be brief. Any language assessments conducted during this stage of development may result in misleading information that underestimates the child's true language capacity.
3. *Telegraphic and Formulaic Speech*. The child is now ready to start using the new language and does so through telegraphic speech that involves the use of formulas. This is similar to a monolingual child who is learning simple words or phrases (content words) to express whole thoughts. For instance, a child might say, "me down" indicating he wants to go downstairs. Formulaic speech refers to unanalyzed chunks of words or sometimes even syllables strung together

that are repetitions of what the child has heard. For example, Tabors (1997) reports that ELLs in the preschool she studied frequently used the phrase "Lookit" to engage others in their play. These are phrases the children had heard from others that helped to achieve their social goals, even though the children probably did not know the meaning of the two words.

4. *Productive Language*. Now the child is starting to go beyond telegraphic or formulaic utterances to create their own phrases and thoughts. Initially the child may use very simple grammatical patterns such as "I wanna play", but over time he will gain control over the structure and vocabulary of the new language. Errors in language usage are common during this period as children are experimenting with their new language and learning its rules and structure.

Sequential bilingual children may have somewhat different patterns of development than monolinguals in certain aspects of language development in the short term. This may include vocabulary, early literacy skills, and interpersonal communication. Young ELLs frequently know fewer vocabulary words in both English and their home language than monolingual children. This may be due to the limited memory capacity of young children or limited exposure to a rich and varied vocabulary. If they speak one language in the home and are learning English at preschool, the child may also know some words in one language and not the other. For instance, the child may have learned the English words recess, chalk, line, etc., at school, but never learned the corresponding words in Spanish because there was no need or opportunity to do so in the home. However, when the total number of words the child knows in both languages is considered together, it is comparable to the number and range of vocabulary words monolingual children know.

Summary

Young children who have regular and rich exposure to two languages during the early childhood years can successfully become bilingual. Most research concludes that there are no negative effects of bilingualism on the linguistic, cognitive or social development of children, and there may even be

some general advantages in these areas of development. Simultaneous bilingualism follows a path similar to monolingual development; sequential second language acquisition occurs in a predictable series of stages or waves. Typically, at any given time, one language may dominate depending on the amount of time spent in each language. As early childhood programs become increasingly diverse, teachers will need to understand the process of second language acquisition and learn how to adapt their expectations and instruction accordingly. Increased understanding will lead to improved methods that will promote the learning and achievement of young children who are learning English as a second language.

A major implication of the increasing proportion of young children who are ELL is the composition and preparation of the early childhood workforce. All staff, teachers, support staff, and administrators will need to understand the developmental characteristics of dual language learners, effective instructional and assessment practices, and most critically, the role of first and second language proficiency in long-term academic success. Ideally, the work force will include professionals who are proficient in English as well as the children's home language and well trained in early childhood pedagogy. In order to realize the potential of early bilingualism, we will need highly skilled teachers who have achieved proficiency in bilingualism, multicultural perspectives, and effective teaching strategies.

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