

# Teaching Dual Language Learners: Building Better Practices

Many early educators have had little or even no preparation in teaching Dual Language Learners (DLLs) or what some call English Language Learners (ELLs). This can leave educators feeling unqualified and unprepared to meet the needs of non-English speaking children who come into their programs. To complicate matters, there are no universal preschool guidelines for curriculum, assessments, mandates, and standards for Dual Language Learners (DLLs) – each state is different in what is followed as best practice and what is required. The good news is that research is quickly growing and providing key strategies to consider what educators need to know, what practices are shown to work best, and how to support success for DLLs.

**Did you know?** English Language Learners in the U.S. come from over 400 different language backgrounds. (Goldenberg 2008)

In the article “Teaching English Language Learners, What the Research Does – and Does Not – Say,” author Claude Goldenberg highlights three key research findings to keep in mind for DLLs:

*“Teaching students to read in their first language promotes higher levels of reading achievement in English; What we know about good instruction and curriculum in general holds true for English learners as well; but when instructing English learners in English, teachers must modify instruction to take into account students’ language limitations.”*

Keep in mind that language acquisition, whether in the child’s home language or second language, doesn’t occur in a few months, but over very long periods of time. We don’t expect babies to come into the world talking in full sentences or young toddlers to be able to speak grammatically. Educators know that there are predictable stages for language development and that there are essential supports to all language development, such as phonological awareness (sound), vocabulary (word and word meaning), grammar (how words go together), and rules of language use (social, academic).

Quality learning programs recognize the importance of celebrating the children’s home language and culture. Embracing the home language allows children to explore and learn in ways that are familiar to them. Respecting children’s cultures helps in building a strong sense of self. Research also shares that children who develop early language and literacy skills in their first language will find it easier to develop those same skills in English.

**Did you know?** Progress from the beginning stage to the point where students are approaching native-like language proficiency seems to take at least six years for most students (e.g. from kindergarten to grade 5 or later; there is variability from one person to the next so these numbers represent general trends). (Goldenberg 2008)

**Learning takes time** – and so does building a comprehensive, effective DLL program. As more research and theory is explored, programs can build specific applications and ideas to weave into their existing curriculum. Programs need professional development, buy-in from staff and families, and alignments with local school districts, their state department of education, and their state early learning department. Quality programs take careful looks into curriculum, assessment, instruction, and ultimately what works best for each child.

How can early educators support the child’s home language while scaffolding, or building upon, English language learning? DLL specialists advocate that there are many practices teachers can apply to support DLLs - even if they do not speak the child’s home language, such as:

**Connect to others** – Teachers can think about how to connect with families, especially those who do not speak English. Volunteers who speak other languages may be able to help present information to families, such as school announcements and welcome letters. Local libraries can offer translational resources and possible support. Teachers can also connect with other staff and educators who use DLL practices. A mentor or someone experienced in DLL

work can be very helpful. There are also programs and others who specialize in DLLs, such as school districts' ELL support teachers. There are also other support programs like Colorin Colorado, <http://www.colorincolorado.org/> a free web-based service that provides information, activities, and advice for educators and Spanish-speaking families of English language learners (ELLs).

**Build meaningful environments** – Along with welcoming children and supporting learning, environments help cue children in knowing what to do, what to expect, and also how to behave. Predictable environments and routines help lower the confusion level for DLLs. When DLLs feel comfortable and prepared, they are more apt to attempt new skills as well as to be able to focus on the language being used. Programs can fill the environment with materials and visuals that support routines and social behaviors, such as picture schedules of the day's activities and photographs showing children helping each other. Materials and items in the room can be labeled in all represented languages, including items that share the culture of all the children in the group (music, books, food). Materials that are provided should be easy to use to support independent exploration. Children have better connections with items that are authentic and represent real life. For example, something familiar such as socks can be used when practicing sorting. If possible, teachers can support conversations in both the child's home language and English.

#### References

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**Use intentional instruction** – Good instruction practices are based not only on appropriate content being taught, but equally on knowing the child's overall developmental needs. Teachers find out what students can do on their own and what they may need support with. Programs can consider how instruction needs to be adapted for DLLs – what language is the instruction in? What might the DLL understand or not understand? What technique can help bridge (scaffold) the instruction, such as using graphics and pictures while talking about specific concepts? Instructional practices can be informed by gathering information from informal assessments such as children's drawings, writings, family intake information, and observations of the child. DLLs need time in small group and one on one interaction with adults. Communication should be multi-layered; for example, while talking with DLLs, teachers can use non-verbal cues (pictures, sounds), point and gesture, change of voice, and use of eye contact. Children need multiple opportunities throughout the day to hear new words in both their home language and second language to comprehend word meaning and build word associations. Key vocabulary can be introduced in rich conversations, story reading, and during meeting times or snack time. Teachers can create opportunities for dual language learners to share without feeling stressed or singled out. For example, they can use music as a tool to practice new words and phrases, or they can incorporate group responses or what some call 'shout outs' while in meeting times (for example, everyone shouts out 'hello!'). Programs can provide plenty of time and opportunity to talk, explore, play, and discover, as time ultimately allows for a deeper understanding of language.

**Help DLLs develop resilience** – Some of the skills that have been said to help children succeed are the ability to focus, have self-control, be interested, and have resilience, or what some are calling 'grit'. DLLs often have many challenges to work through. With optimism, educators can create bridges that lead DLLs to success and also provide safe places for taking risks and making mistakes.