

**This collection of four *Young Children* articles touches on some of the many special considerations related to supporting young dual language learners and their families.**

**H. Victoria Prieto** writes about how to support bilingualism—or multilingualism—in infant/toddler programs in “One Language, Two Languages, Three Languages . . . More?”

**Joan Youngquist and Bárbara Martínez-Griego** outline the steps a multicenter Head Start program in Washington State took to improve their services for Spanish-speaking children and their families in “Learning in English, Learning in Spanish: A Head Start Program Changes Its Approach.”

**Ruth Shagoury** writes about how one teacher supported children’s emerging writing skills in a multilingual kindergarten classroom in “Language to Language: Nurturing Writing Development in Multilingual Classrooms.”

**Karen Nemeth and Pamela Brillante** offer teaching strategies for helping children whose challenging behaviors in the classroom may be related to or complicated by language barriers in “Solving the Puzzle: Dual Language Learners with Challenging Behaviors.”





## One Language, Two Languages, Three Languages . . . More?

It is about time to go home for the day, and 2-year-old Lupe is happily playing with a book, pretending to read it to another child. Lupe notices her teacher Silvia and walks over to show her the book. Silvia, who is bilingual, asks her, “¿Quieres que te lea el libro?” [Do you want me to read you the book?]. Lupe nods. Silvia reads in Spanish to Lupe and the other child, pointing out the illustrations and using a warm and caring voice. The children look up at her and smile. They are both enjoying a good time with Silvia, pointing to the objects in the book and saying the words in Spanish.

Lupe’s mom Adela, a native Spanish speaker, arrives to pick up her daughter. She appears surprised by what she sees and hears. Adela asks Silvia, “Why are you speaking to her in Spanish? Lupe needs to learn English!”

**THIS SCENARIO DEMONSTRATES** the myth that non-English speakers must learn English early and rapidly. Adela worries that Lupe will not learn English successfully if she continues to hear Spanish, but research on dual language acquisition (DLA) shows that Adela’s assumption that children can learn only one language at a time is inaccurate. The fact is, given the opportunity, very young children can and will learn two or more languages at the same time (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago 2004).

Some children, from birth until they enter preschool, hear only the lan-

guage spoken at home by their parents and relatives. Others, like Lupe, who entered a child care program at 3 months of age, also hear the language that the majority of people outside the home speak. It is important that early childhood teachers help families understand that children can learn two languages at the same time. They should reassure parents that learning two languages doesn’t come at the expense of either language.

A child who can communicate and socialize with his parents, grandparents, and extended family will maintain the connection to his cultural identity and acquire a sense of belonging (NAEYC 1995). In addition, cognitive skills such as thinking, reasoning, problem solving, and word choice, which the child uses in learning his home language, are the same skills needed to learn English, thus paving the way for later school success.

Infants and toddlers have the ability to learn more than one language at the same time and can do so well (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago 2004). The belief that a child has to abandon his

home language to be able to learn English implies that the young brain has limited learning capacity. In fact, there is no need to “make space” for language in a young child’s brain, because the brain is wired to learn language. This concept is at the core of the most effective advice educators can give families: Make every effort to help children learn and keep their home language. What matters most is that the infant/toddler is exposed to an effective language-learning environment, whether it is in a supportive care setting or at home (Powers 2008).

### Learning environments

An effective learning environment for the young dual language learner is one in which strategies are in place to *intentionally* and *continuously* support bilingualism. Such practice validates children’s home language. It also helps them develop a sense of self.

In high-quality infant/toddler programs, the teachers

**H. Victoria Prieto**, MA, EdS, is a bilingual training specialist at the Early Head Start National Resource Center at ZERO TO THREE. Victoria is a former primary teacher of English as a second language and a home visitor. She chairs the Birth to Three Institute.

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Illustration by Melanie Hope Greenberg.

- engage young children in conversation during daily routines, for example, during mealtime or before nap time;
- read with children, using common words, poems, songs, and stories in children's home languages;
- label objects verbally;
- introduce the sounds of the alphabet letters to the dual language learner in the home language in addition to English; and
- invite families and members of the child's cultural community to share stories, songs, and food.

In the home, parents and other adults

- talk with the child in their home language;
- read books in their home language or tell their own stories to their children; and
- encourage children to use their home language to talk and socialize with them and with the extended family.

Whether in the classroom or at home, the most effective strategy for early language learning is frequent exposure to and repetition in the language that the adults are most comfortable speaking.

### THINK FIRST

- Consider what may be your own cultural biases about exposing infants and toddlers to more than one language. Assess your assumptions on these issues.
- Think about how you can explore with families their beliefs about dual language acquisition. What language do the parents or the extended family use to talk to the child? Do you feel comfortable asking the family for that information?
- Keep up-to-date on what research says about exposing a child to two languages in infancy and how successful young children are at learning two or more languages at the same time. One of the many benefits is that through interactions and experiences in two languages, young children acquire literacy skills way before they enter school, before formal reading and writing instruction begins. Think about ways to share this information with families.

### NOW TRY IT

- Demonstrate respect for families' values and beliefs by responding to their preferences for language use in the infant/toddler classroom.
- Learn about the cognitive, social, and economic benefits of bilingualism, and share your knowledge with families.
- Share with parents strategies that can enrich the home language environment.
- Provide children's books and materials, such as CDs, musical toys, blocks, and puppets, that families can use at home.
- Invite families to share with the class some of the music, stories, and songs from their native background.
- Use interpreters, if possible and when necessary, to communicate with families in their own language. Whenever possible, handouts with information about their child or announcements should be translated into a family's home language.
- Encourage parents to visit the classroom. Create activities such as house-keeping play that they can engage in with their child at school and at home.

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# Learning in English, Learning in Spanish

## A Head Start Program Changes Its Approach

Joan Youngquist and  
Bárbara Martínez-Griego

**SKAGIT/ISLANDS HEAD START** (SIHS) in Washington State has always taken pride in its high-quality learning program. But in spring 2002, we discovered a problem: the child assessments from 13 centers serving children from birth to age 5 indicated that although Spanish-speaking 3-year-olds entered with language and literacy skills at a level similar to their English-speaking peers, a year later they were lagging behind.

This finding concerned us greatly, as approximately 60 percent of enrolled

families were Latino, with 40 percent speaking Spanish as their home language. We knew that our Latino children's learning success was at risk because statistics from our local high school showed that 50 percent of Latino boys dropped out of school. We also knew that the stage for school failure is set early.

What surprised us was seeing an early discrepancy in our own program! Our staff recognized the value of a child's primary language and regularly translated information for families into Spanish. In addition, whenever possible, we hired classroom staff who spoke at least some Spanish. However, upon close inspection, we discovered that our classrooms were inconsistent and inadequate in supporting children's primary language. While our local program guidance emphasized English immersion, staff differed in their beliefs and approaches. Some held to the English immersion model; others tried their best to teach in two languages. Many non-English-speaking families wanted their children to learn English quickly, and some stopped speaking Spanish at home and tried speaking what English they could to their children. This created a situation in which children failed to receive a solid foundation in any language during a crucial time in their language development.

Aware of all these factors, we knew it was time to reevaluate our local program guidance, which was based on two assumptions: all children need to be fluent in English by kindergarten and the best way to accomplish this is through a total English immersion approach in the classroom. These assumptions were due to common practice, limited knowledge, and a lack of expertise available in the community. To change would be difficult, we knew. And to be successful, change must be thoughtful, intentional, and take place over time. To begin, we initiated an intentional multistep, multiyear process to transform the approach to language and learning in our classrooms.

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**Joan Youngquist**, PhD, is interim academic dean and executive director of Skagit/Islands Head Start at Skagit Valley College in Mount Vernon, Washington. She has more than 15 years of experience as a teacher and an administrator in multicultural early learning programs.

**Bárbara Martínez-Griego**, MA, is chair of the Early Childhood Education Department and lead instructor at Skagit Valley College. She teaches child development courses in Spanish and English, infusing them with strategies for working effectively with bilingual children and families. Bárbara is a co-researcher in the Teaching Umoja Participatory Action Research project in Kingston, Jamaica. She has worked as an elementary school teacher, preschool teacher, Head Start program administrator, and child care licenser. [Barbara.Martinez@skagit.edu](mailto:Barbara.Martinez@skagit.edu)

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**When young children are learning more than one language, both languages follow the typical development process, and this does not cause language disorders or substantive language delays.**

### **Step 1.**

#### **Refining the vision and defining a paradigm shift**

The SIHS vision was and *is* that all children succeed in learning now and when they continue on to kindergarten and the higher grades. Our non-English-speaking children were not achieving this goal. Thus, the first step in changing our language-learning approach was for both staff and families to understand the important role language plays in achieving this vision. Support of program directors and management staff was essential, and one of us (coauthor Bárbara Martínez-Griego) took the lead in researching language learning and presenting our findings to the management staff.

Research supports the need for children to develop a strong foundation and learn concepts in their primary language, and it identifies the cognitive benefit in learning two languages as long as children have a strong foundation in their primary language (Bialystok 2001; Cronin & Sosa Massó 2004.) We learned that when young children are learning more than one language, both languages follow the typical development process, and this does not cause language disorders or substantive language delays (Lee 1996). Children may sometimes mix both languages within sentences (for example, “*vamos outside*”), but this

tendency resolves itself as language proficiencies increase (Quiñones-Eatman 2001).

Research consistently points to significant social, emotional, cultural, economic, and linguistic gains when children become bilingual early in life:

- Non-English-speaking children with a strong foundation in their home language learn to read, write, and speak in English faster than children who do not have that foundation (Cummins 1993).
- Preventing children from developing their primary language can have a negative impact on academic achievement (Sanchez & Thorp 1998).
- Young children can become increasingly fluent in a second language if they have opportunities to speak it with a variety of individuals, on a variety of topics, and for a variety of reasons (Quiñones-Eatman 2001).
- Failure to learn the primary home language well can be a source of identity confusion for children and be harmful to family function (Makin, Jones Díaz, & McLachlan 2007).
- Children in bilingual school programs outperform comparable monolingual students in academic subjects after four to six years of dual language education. A bilingual program must meet a child’s developmental needs,

including the academic, cognitive, emotional, social, and physical. Schools should create a learning environment with lots of natural and rich oral and written experiences in each language instead of providing translations (Thomas & Collier 2002).

With this knowledge to guide our planning, we began a very intentional process of changing the program paradigm from “English immersion is the road to success” to “A strong foundation in a primary language is essential for success.”

### **Step 2.**

#### **Raising staff awareness**

To *describe* a paradigm shift is one thing, but it is quite another for management to make it happen in a large, geographically and culturally diverse organization. SIHS enrolls 83 children in Early Head Start and 348 preschoolers in 13 centers in Skagit Island and San Juan counties of western Washington. Demanding that staff change their practices would obviously only create resentment, so we began by talking a lot. Management staff shared questions with each other during weekly staff meetings, with classroom staff, and with coauthor



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Bárbara, who offered her knowledge and research findings indicating what was best for children.

Questions and doubts raised by teachers caused us to look even deeper and to develop more knowledge on the topic. Bárbara wrote articles in the staff newsletter based on her experience, the research, and her observations of children in our program. The management team established a new program committee—the Multicultural Committee—to explore the question of primary language learning and the broader issue of cultural awareness in which the issue rested. This talk continued for about a year, and some frustration set in. Bárbara felt that her knowledge and expertise were not convincing enough for staff and that, as is often true for an organization, an outside expert could be more effective in demonstrating that change was necessary and possible.

### Step 3.

#### **Solidifying staff by bringing in outside expertise**

Our location near Seattle, a large metropolitan center, had advantages, such as access to Pacific Oaks College. Faculty member Sharon Cronin was well known for her work and expertise in the area of supporting primary language and culture. Bárbara invited her to present a one-day training for all SIHS staff in spring 2004. Through lecture, group activities, music, and games, Cronin effectively communicated the importance of supporting learning in a child's primary language.

**Children enter preschool rich in their own language, and the important teaching builds on that strength rather than immersing children in a new language and ignoring the language and literacy development they have experienced so far.**

## Real Stories about Dual Language Curriculum

**Our intention each year is to design a program uniquely responsive to each particular group of children.** Decisions about language usage and curriculum choices are always based on data gathered from families and observations of the children during the crucial first few weeks of the year.

This year we had a large group of monolingual Spanish speakers. The teaching staff decided to have two teachers speak Spanish and our third teacher speak English throughout the entire day. We recently reassessed the children's needs and will incorporate more English in our day. We are seeing children gain skills in their primary language and develop skills in a second language. They can then practice new terms and phrases in English.

The children attain goals more rapidly than they did when we spoke to them only in English, which allows us to develop new goals with parents. This is in contrast to the slower progress observed in past years. Another benefit we've noticed is an increased sense of community within the classroom environment.

—Cynthia Fuentes, Teacher,  
Burlington-Edison Child Development Center

Literacy is more than reading books and counting and reciting the alphabet, staff learned as they began to see the importance of communicating with children in a variety of ways—through oral stories and folklore and through art, drama, and music. Children enter preschool rich in their own language, Cronin emphasized, and the important teaching builds on that strength rather than immersing children in a new language and ignoring the language and literacy development they have experienced so far.

In an English immersion program, Cronin explained to staff, children struggle with learning both basic concepts and language at the same time. She noted that it takes seven years

or longer for a person to learn the new academic language. In contrast, when a program supports children in learning concepts in their primary language, they can more readily transfer these concepts to the second language and actually become fluent in English faster.

The workshop was a success. Teachers spoke with excitement about supporting every child's primary language in the classroom. Now, we had staff "buy-in," but was this enough to bring about the needed change?

We recognized the importance of involving families and the community. Family services specialists and teachers at each of our centers talked with parents individually and during family-night activities both to educate parents and to invite their feedback. Although initially some parents were hesitant about a dual language approach, as they learned more about language and learning and the benefit to all children, most became strong advocates for dual language and bilingual learning. Coauthor Bárbara held forums at local schools and community centers to present information to the community at large.

#### **Step 4.** **Turning knowledge into practice— Experimentation starts**

After the staff training, we noticed that the inconsistencies in classroom support of children's primary language that had existed in 2002 began to disappear. By this time, September 2004, staff knew that the expectations of program leadership had changed. They understood better the importance of supporting children's primary language at school and in the home.

In classrooms with bilingual teachers, we observed changes in teaching strategies. Teachers were more intentional in their use of Spanish when conversing with children who were Spanish speakers. At one center, teachers held two circle time groups, one in Spanish and one in English.

Children took part in the Spanish circle one day and the English circle the next day, so that both the English and Spanish speakers would experience the same content and activities in each language. Staff requested books in Spanish, and we allocated funds to increase our bilingual library. But with all their valiant efforts, staff still expressed frustration and doubt about how to implement a dual language curriculum. Knowledge based primarily on one workshop was not enough to bring about change.

#### **Step 5.** **Committing organizational support**

Supporting children's primary language is difficult when staff speak only English. The vast majority of

our teaching staff in 2002 were monolingual English. Many teacher aides or teaching assistants were Spanish speaking, but many had limited English skills. We knew that if children were to hear and converse in their primary language, we would need at least one teacher in each classroom who spoke the child's language. In addition to staff training, we changed the ways we support and use language in our classrooms. Our four primary strategies included the following:

**Hire bilingual staff whenever possible.** This was relatively easy for positions that did not require a degree or experience, but we found a very limited, often nonexistent, pool of bilingual applicants for teaching or home-visiting positions that required associate's or bachelor's degrees.

**Support monolingual staff in improving their language skills.** Our program paid the tuition for several staff members to attend intensive Spanish language classes both during the summer and the school year. This allowed several teaching and home visiting staff, previously uncomfortable conversing in Spanish, to become familiar with the language and able to have meaningful conversations with children and families. Several improved their fluency to the point that they no longer needed the support of translators even during parent conferences.

**Support bilingual staff in working toward a credential or degree.** Our program historically supported center teachers in working toward an AA (associate's) degree in response to national Head Start expectations. We extended that support to aides, many of whom were bilingual. After bilingual aides had achieved the CDA (Child Development Associate) credential and/or received AA degrees, they were effective in supporting dual language classroom activities. We created a pool of bilingual candidates ready to apply for teaching positions as these opened up.

### **Real Stories about Dual Language Curriculum**

**We divide children into three groups:** Spanish, bilingual, and English. We meet with each family and assess the child's needs to determine the primary language. We consider the child's age. If the child will be going to kindergarten next and their English skills are good, we place them in the English group, since kindergarten instruction is in English in our community.

The children learn in their language group during small group and individual activities during free choice. Large group activities are inclusive. The English speakers also learn Spanish. We use props and gestures that help English speakers understand what is happening. Throughout the school year we reassess the children, and we may reassign a child to a different group as needs and skills develop. Teachers also work on their language skills to build their vocabulary in Spanish.

Each year brings something new, so we adjust as needed. Sometimes we have lots of Spanish speakers. Sometimes we have many bilingual Spanish/English. This year one child is becoming trilingual English/Spanish/Punjabi. The mom gave us the Punjabi alphabet and has made labels for the classroom. She also wrote out her child's name in Punjabi so the child could practice writing it each day during sign in.

Dual language curriculum is a lot of work, but I know that the children and parents are benefiting. Everything we do supports the acquisition of a second language and retention of the primary language. Parents can communicate with the teachers in their language so they can ask questions and participate without any hesitation.

—*Barbara Guillen, Manager,  
LaPaloma Head Start Center*

**Engage language aides.** When other strategies were unsuccessful, we found volunteers or hired part-time language aides who worked with children in their primary language in the classroom. Teachers reported that having an aide who speaks a child's primary language in the classroom even just one hour per day made a difference in a child's ability to integrate into the classroom and maintain his or her primary language skills while learning English.

## Step 6.

### Testing new models in pilot centers

With administrative support, staff buy-in, and a growing knowledge and skill base, we readied ourselves to increase the intentional support of primary language in the classroom. Four centers expressed a strong interest in piloting an intentional dual language curriculum in September 2004. Each center's community was completely different, and centers employed staff with skills in different languages. The same approach might not be appropriate for each center, and we knew different models could be effective in supporting bilingual classrooms (Cronin & Sosa Massó 2004).

The models ranged from valuing the home language by learning a few key words and encouraging parents' use of the primary language at home to implementing true dual language programs providing meaningful learning experiences and language development in two languages. When determining the best model for a given program, it was important for staff to consider both the language and cultural experiences of enrolled children as well as bilingual language skills of staff.

Bárbara met with each center team to discuss its plans for implementing dual language curriculum. One center, located in a predominantly Latino neighborhood, wanted to teach primarily in Spanish. Even though this was not a true dual



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language approach, we supported the plan since all the children came from monolingual, Spanish-speaking families. Centers gradually introduced English during the year through small group activities that focused on concepts already learned in Spanish.

Other centers enrolling both English- and Spanish-speaking children assigned part of the day to teaching in Spanish and the balance to teaching in English. Two circle times—one in Spanish and one in English, at different times of the day or on different days and with all children or in small groups—covered the same concepts. Staff who were not fluent in Spanish were encouraged to learn four key words each week to use in conversation with children. One center employed a model that had four days of instruction per week. This included two days teaching in Spanish and two days teaching in English, with the same concepts and activities emphasized in both languages. An Early Head Start class for 2- and 3-year-olds used English one day, Spanish the next day, and sign language on alternate days as a bridge between days.

While many staff understood what they thought a dual language curriculum should look like, a few struggled with program implementation and a concern that if they didn't get it right,

children would suffer. Because this concern might hold people back, we encouraged staff to develop their own ideas and strategies. It was important to try and OK to fail and try again. The mentoring and coaching Bárbara provided to center staff was extremely valuable at this stage. She observed in classrooms, scheduled meetings and reflection time with each center team, and arranged for Sharon Cronin to visit each center to observe and offer ideas to staff.

Monthly meetings of the multicultural committee became a venue for group sharing and reflection. The mutual support that staff provided to each other was key in encouraging teachers to implement a new and unfamiliar approach. The support from Bárbara and from one another helped to ensure that strategies met program expectations.

**The mutual support that staff provided to each other was key in encouraging teachers to implement a new and unfamiliar approach.**

## Step 7.

### Providing more staff development and experiencing a little serendipity

Looking for and taking advantage of opportunities that support change is essential. In January 2005, our local community college, Skagit Valley College, received a Head Start/Higher Education Latino Partnership Grant. The grant funds let us hire faculty with a strong knowledge of dual language and bilingual curriculum approaches. The award paid the tuition for some staff members to work toward the CDA credential and/or an AA degree. The Early Childhood Education Department of the college arranged a summer, weeklong intensive course in dual language curriculum, led by Sharon Cronin, who had joined the Praxis Institute for Early Childhood Education in Seattle. Many of our teaching staff participated and returned to their centers with stronger skills, a fuller understanding of dual language/bilingual curriculum approaches, and a new, positive attitude toward and in support of the program priority for hiring Spanish-speaking staff.

By February we had experienced another unexpected opportunity that contributed to the success of Skagit/Islands Head Start's changing approach. Six staff members attended the first Head Start Latino Institute in Albuquerque. The sessions helped them further build their knowledge and skills, and they met professionals from across the country who were interested in dual language and bilingual curriculum approaches.

Without the grant or the institutes, we are confident that we would still have been successful in implementing the change to a dual language curriculum. By now we had the commitment of administration, management, and key staff and had accessed resources for building staff knowledge. But this support from outside our program contributed to the effectiveness of

dual language learning and to faster adoption of classroom strategies, and it validated the importance of our approach.

## Step 8.

### Reflecting and planning

Thinking about where you have been and where you are going is crucial to maintaining a paradigm shift and program change. We spent four years developing an understanding of and changing our approach to primary language development. We increased the number of bilingual staff in classrooms and furthered staff knowledge and skills about the importance of children learning in their primary language. We successfully established an intentional dual language curriculum in several preschool centers, an early Head Start classroom, and a home-visiting program.

Our new approach is working. Child assessments indicate that children from Spanish-speaking families now demonstrate progress in early literacy skills equal to or better than their English-speaking peers. Families understand the importance of their own language and value the dual language approach. English- and Spanish-speaking families alike are excited about their children becoming fluent in two languages.

The journey is not over. There are challenges associated with changing

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communities and questions yet to be answered. How do we effectively support five or more primary languages in the same classroom? With staff turnover, how do we maintain and continue to develop staff knowledge and skills? Without the continued staff development assistance of Bárbara, how do we continue to mentor staff? How do we keep our momentum with increasing demands on our time and attention?

Skagit/Islands Head Start is committed to continuing its efforts to ensure that every child has a strong foundation in his or her primary language. Staff from our pilot centers will share what they have learned with other center staff and early childhood professionals in our community. We will collaborate with school district partners who are implementing dual language and bilingual classrooms. We will continue to seek opportunities to increase staff knowledge and skills.

## Conclusion

After discovering that Spanish-speaking children in English-immersion preschool classrooms demonstrated lower literacy and language skills, we transformed the approach to language and learning in our Head Start program through an intentional process to

- increase staff knowledge of language learning and dual language/bilingual curriculum approaches;
- provide support through bilingual and multicultural materials for children, teachers, and parents, and additional staff when needed; and
- enlarge the number of staff with bilingual skills—through hiring and educating bilingual staff and supporting monolingual staff in pursuing language classes.

With encouragement, staff developed and tried new strategies, and the support they received ensured that the strategies met program expectations.

Our efforts were successful. Children from both Spanish- and

**With encouragement, staff developed and tried new strategies, and the support they received ensured that the strategies met program expectations.**

English-speaking families now demonstrate similar skill levels in language and literacy. After five years, our teachers find teaching in a bilingual or dual language classroom very natural. We have participated in the national CRADLE (Cultural Responsiveness and Dual Education) project bringing dual language and bilingual learning to Early Head Start. Our Early Head Start teachers implement a trilingual

approach with Spanish, English, and American Sign Language.

The future includes maintaining a language-appropriate curriculum approach—dual language or otherwise—in the face of new challenges, including classrooms with multiple languages, and continuing the education of all staff, even in the face of limited funding.

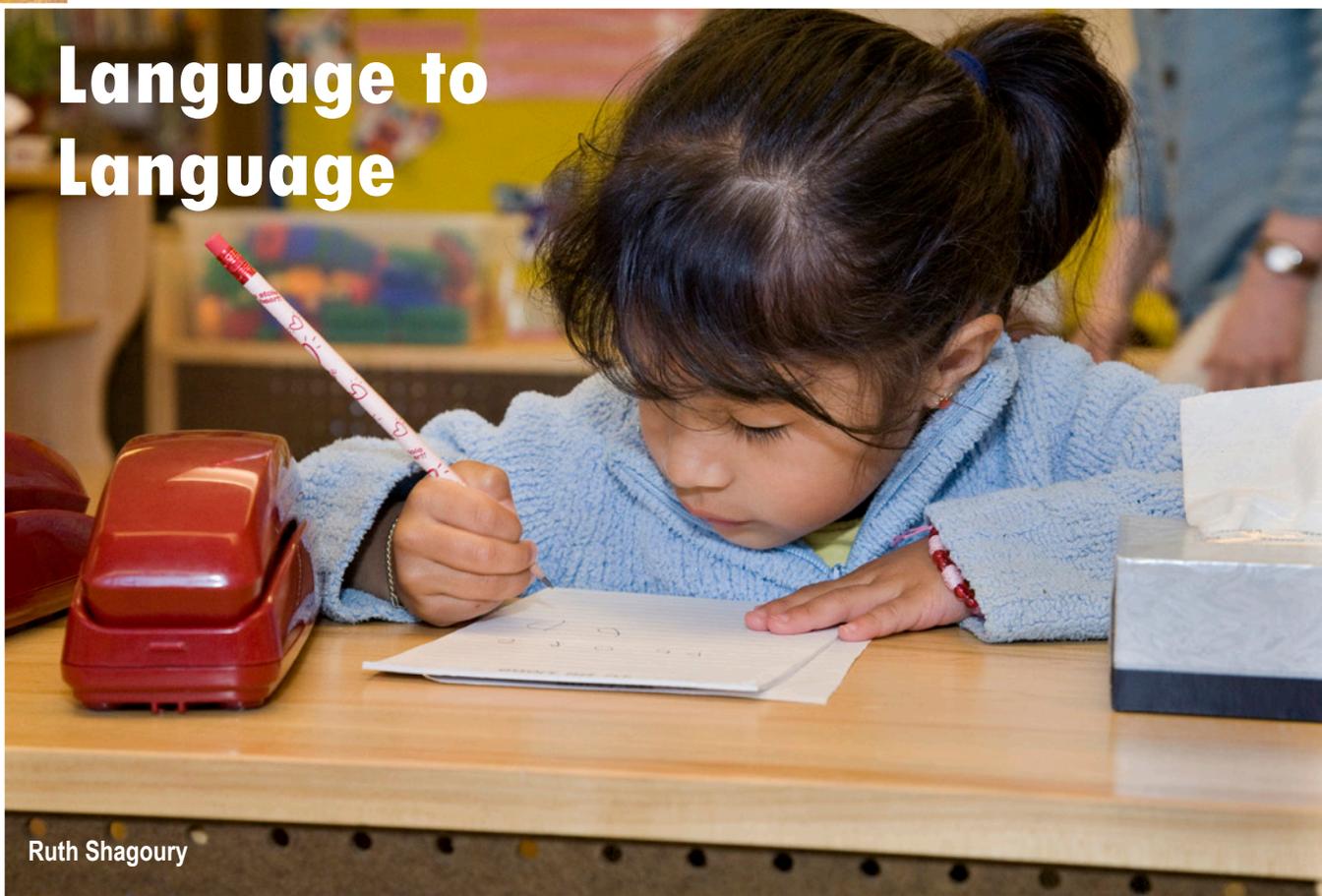
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# Language to Language



Ruth Shagoury

## Nurturing Writing Development in Multilingual

I sit in a small circle with several 5-year-olds as they pore through their writing journals to share pieces that are ready for publication on the writing wall. The children have created a thoughtful process for inviting two mostly silent friends into the conversation about writing. One of those students, Mariaevelyn, rarely ventures words even in her native Spanish. The other child, Lyuba, just now beginning to mouth a word or two of either Russian or English, smiles her way through the day.

Nonetheless, they actively participate in the group conference. As Alma, David, and Tonia share their writing, they pass their journals over to Mariaevelyn and Lyuba. Each of these girls, in turn, ponders the page, and then points to a section of the journal with a detail that she likes.

“Oh, you like the words?” Alma asks, as she follows Lyuba’s pointed finger.

Lyuba nods.

Mariaevelyn likes the big yellow sun, and points to the upper right-hand corner.

“I like the sun part too,” Alma confirms. “And I can make a rainbow.”

 **2, 3, 4**

**C**ommunity—one of the intangibles that make a classroom run smoothly—helps welcome all learners into the daily work. As children with diverse backgrounds, cultures, and languages come together in learning environments from preschool on, it is vital that each person initiate actions that invite others’ voices into the mix.

Creating a literate classroom environment that nurtures the writing development of dual language learners (DLLs) requires more than presenting a series of skills to learn or academics to master. Classrooms should also be dedicated to building on children’s knowledge, experience, and needs and to assisting in their acquiring shared knowledge and understandings about what literacy is and how it can be a gift for communicating and learning.

## Classroom context

As a university literacy researcher, I have been investigating what is possible for dual language learners as they acquire literacy skills. For four years, I was embedded in Andie Cunningham's multilingual kindergarten class,

**Children need the chance to explore and actively figure out the ways that written language works in different situations, continually trying out their hypotheses.**

a classroom in which children typically spoke at least six different languages (Cunningham & Shagoury 2005). As I looked more closely at the children's beginning reading skills, I came to appreciate the importance of written language to their overall literacy growth, thus shifting my focus to written language acquisition and development. To extend my research, I spent two years in Head Start classrooms with preschool multilingual students. These young learners taught me what is possible for preschool children to

accomplish in terms of written language development.

The majority of research that focuses on children's writing is based on native English-speaking children. But more specific study of young dual language learners as they develop as writers is beginning to take place. In her recent book

*When English Language Learners Write*, Katharine Samway concludes that "the most current research shows that non-native English-speaking children are capable of much more than is

generally expected of them" (2006, 22).

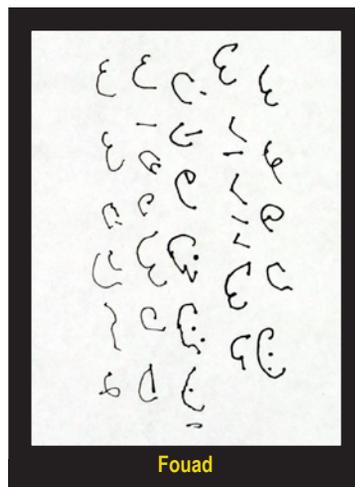
## Young dual language learners' awareness of print

Young children across languages and cultures reveal an awareness of the particular written features of their first languages (Harste, Woodward, & Burke 1984). Four-year-old Fouad's Arabic writing, for example, has lots of dots and squiggles, which he reads back in Arabic. Five-year-old Bao Jun's Chinese writing shows logographic characteristics. Both children also make shapes that represent the English alphabet that they see around them. Even very early scribble writing, such as 3-year-old Cecilia's, is reflective of cursive English (see "Children's Writing Samples").

**Ruth Shagoury, PhD**, is a literacy professor at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon, where she teaches, researches, and coordinates the language and literacy program. She works with students of all ages, from preschool through adult. [ruth.shagoury@gmail.com](mailto:ruth.shagoury@gmail.com)

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## Children's Writing Samples



Bilingual children immersed in dual languages at home since birth sort out the two languages, creating hypotheses about how to speak both. In the same way, young dual language learners actively figure out the way written language works in their first and second languages. Katharine Samway (2006) stresses the need for dual language learners to have access to what she calls "the creative construction principle" to allow their writing to emerge. In other words, children need the chance to explore and actively figure out the ways that written language works in different situations, continually trying out their hypotheses. Another researcher of bilingual developing writers, Emilia Ferreiro, advises, "Children have shown us that they need to reconstruct the written system in order to make it their own. Let us allow them the time and the opportunities for such a tremendous task" (1980, 56).

**Five-year-old Song enters kindergarten in the fall, speaking a few words, phrases, and expressions in English. Hmong is her first language and the language her family speaks at home, although their English language skills are strong enough that they do not need translators at parent conferences.**

**Since there are no other Hmong speakers in Song's class, nor ethnic Hmong aides or translators at the school, English**

is what Song uses to communicate with her friends at school. She is by no means silent, although often quiet. She relies on gestures, pictures, and simple phrases and sentences in English to get her meaning across.

Song's literacy grows steadily over the school year. In the fall, she draws many pictures and makes a gradual transition to adding letters to go with them. She also copies letters from the English and Spanish words she sees in the classroom environment. By May, Song begins to use letters to represent sounds. In her drawing of the water in a river [see "Song's Writing"], she uses an *r* for the /r/ sound. And on the very same page, she uses a string of Chinese characters, which, she tells us, is the kind of writing her parents do.



Song's Writing

Song's growing literacy in two languages seemed to help shore up her confidence to share her at-home writing with us in school. By June she experimented with exclamation marks, voice bubbles, and spaces between words, and she wrote several books to share with friends. The classroom environment allowed Song the time and space to be an active and creative written language user.

### Writing right from the start

Song is not an exception. Dual language learners can write before orally mastering a second language (Edelsky 1982, 1983; Huddleson 1989; Taylor 1990; Samway 2006). Just like first language-speaking children, dual language learners write before they can read and use drawing to explore their ideas and thinking.

Russian-speaking Kostya comes to kindergarten speaking no English but is very willing to use gestures and facial expressions to communicate with adults and classmates. He usually looks very serious when he opens his writing journal and sits down to write—with intention.

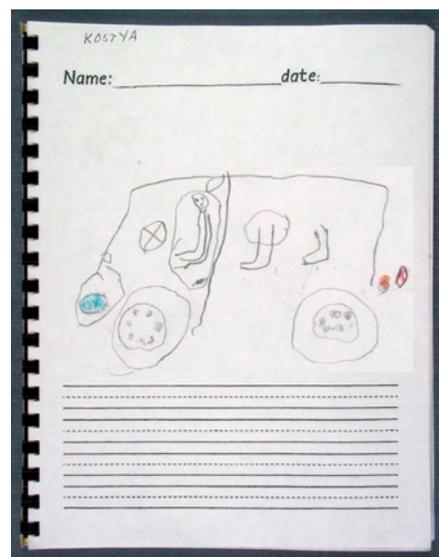
One morning, his story is about the truck his father drives [see "Kostya's Writing"]. Like all good writers, Kostya uses detail in his piece—from lug nuts in the tires to the steering wheel, to the exhaust floating out at the vehicle's rear. He even includes the passengers' arms dangling out of the windows.

When asked about his drawing, Kostya explains in Russian, but knowing I cannot understand, he supplements

his verbal explanation with pointing, movement, and gesture. Our exchange of conversation helps his language development, as I continue to guess his meaning, supplying English words for *car* (he shakes his head no), and *bus* (no again, but with a smile this time). But then I am rewarded with an emphatic yes when I offer the word *truck*.

"Yes, truck!" he repeats, which draws his neighbors, Luis and Tony, into our conversation, sparked by Kostya's writing.

What is the role of talk in developing dual language learners' emerging literacy? Researchers Ernst and Richard (1995) found that talk is indeed an important influence on preschool and early elementary children's developing oral and written fluency in English. Writing/drawing are conversation starters that help children share their interests and stories in response to each other (Hubbard 1985).



Kostya's Writing



## The role of home languages in writing development

Bilingual programs have an obvious advantage. Research shows that children who learn literacy in their first language do not need to relearn these skills. Dual language learners who learn to read in their home language do not need to be taught to read in English; they simply transfer the skill to their second language. The same principle holds true for writing (Schechter & Bayley 2002; Freeman & Freeman 2003).

In diverse schools in which children speak many languages, it is not feasible to create bilingual programs for every language. But whenever possible, it is beneficial to find speakers of second languages to talk and write with young children in their home language.

Kindergartner Alma writes a complex story one day, in pictures. She starts to write out sounds to label the story. *Cat* and *twins* are the two English words that stand out in her story. In an attempt to help her, a classroom helper dictates letters to her. These are not words she can read back, so she turns from this story in frustration. But the classroom's bilingual aide encourages Alma to tell her story in Spanish, and the words pour out, a story of a girl who had a twin who died in Mexico and how the other twin thinks of her. (*Una niña tiene una gemela que una vez se murio. Ahora la gemela esta pensando en ella.*)

*Ella esta en el cementaria.)* Sounding out words in Spanish helps Alma to write her story.

Marina, a 5-year-old Russian speaker, appreciates every chance she has to speak with Luba, the Russian aide and translator at her school. On her own, during writing workshop, Marina creates a little book with some writing

Writing/drawing are conversation starters that help children share their interests and stories in response to each other.

in English and a few Cyrillic letters and words like *CPMAS* for *Christmas*. She felt comfortable taking the risk of speaking to me and to others with a few words of English.

When Christina, a visiting teacher, spends the morning in the classroom, Marina discovers that Christina reads and writes Russian, and a quiet child becomes a chatterbox.

Marina writes a story of her mom drying clothes in the sun [see "Marina's Writing"]. She writes the word for *sun* in English, using one set of symbols (CAOA) and then another set (COЦE) for the Russian word for *sun* (conyue: teacher transla-



Marina's Writing

tion) in Cyrillic. The Russian words for *clothes* and *drying the clothes* are written in Cyrillic, using invented spelling.

Because Christina was able to talk and write with Marina in both Russian and English, this encouraged Marina to speak and write in the two languages as well.

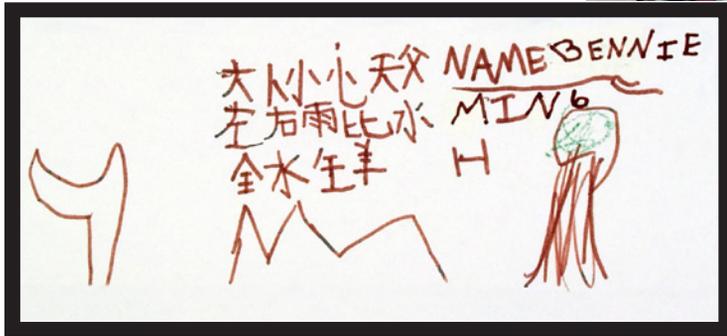
In the same class, Bennie makes similar strides in his writing. In the spring he reads his journal and explains his drawings in Cantonese when his mother comes for a parent conference. Although Bennie now speaks more frequently in English in class than he did earlier in the year and uses English phrases and gestures to tell about his writing, during the parent conference he expresses very complete thoughts about his writing, which we never heard him do before.

The same week, he shares two pieces of writing with me: the first is a kind of picture story about spiders, birds, and his brother and sister [see "Bennie's Writing"]. In English letters he writes *Ming*, his Cantonese name, as well



Bennie's Writing





**Bennie's Story**

as *Bennie*. He includes his brother's English name, Alex, and a row of letters. On the same day, he writes a story in Chinese logographs—a skill we never saw him use in class before [see “Bennie's Story”]. At the end of the day, I see him tuck this writing into his jacket pocket to take home and share with his family.

Stories like these provide additional support for the research that shows dual language learners can write in both their home language and a second language without becoming confused. In a fascinating yearlong ethnography, Edelsky and Jilbert (1985) found that children learned both Spanish and English simultaneously without confusion, and they were able to differentiate between the two writing systems. In their Spanish invented spellings, the children used tildes (~) over the appropriate letters and never used the letter *k*, which the Spanish use only in foreign words. In any writing that the children read back in English, they omitted tildes and did not use the letter *k*.



### Reviewing research findings

Writing processes for young children are very similar across languages (Samway 2006). Even children whose first language is logographic, such as Chinese and Korean, rather than alphabetic, like English or Spanish, invent spellings and writing symbols (Chi 1988). When the two written language systems that children are learning are very different, children still draw on their knowledge of their home language as well as their growing understanding of English, testing out hypotheses just as they do in their oral language (Edelsky & Jilbert 1985).

### Conclusion

All young children, whether English speaking or learning English as a second—or third!—language, blossom in environments that encourage genuine communication by whatever means work. Children need access to caring adults dedicated to making sense of what each child is trying to share through language, and they need to be a part of



a learning community that encourages children's reliance on each other. Rather than sitting at a desk, focused on individual learning tasks, a workshop atmosphere encourages children to determine what tools, peers, and mentors will aid them in their quest to make meaning.

### Nurturing Dual Language Learners' Writing Development

1. Look at each child as an individual. All writers are unique, and their writing development will reflect those idiosyncratic qualities. Get to know the children with whom you work, their interests, and their writing processes.
2. Encourage children to write and draw their stories right from the beginning, before they have mastered oral English.
3. Create opportunities for children to share writing with adults in the classroom and among their peers, young writers themselves.
4. Allow children the time and space they need to test out their hypotheses about written language.
5. Use each child's first language often and in as many different ways as possible in classroom activities.
6. Surround children with print in a range of languages and alphabetic and logographic systems.

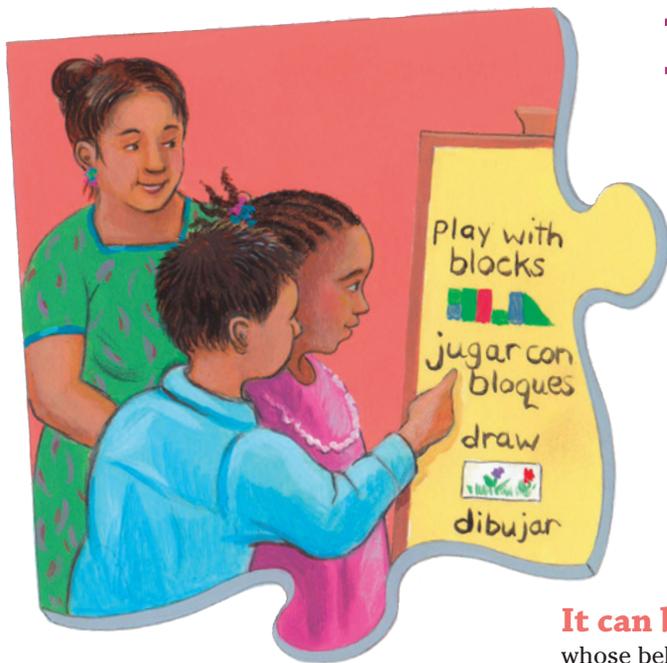
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# Solving the Puzzle



## Dual Language Learners with Challenging Behaviors

Karen Nemeth and Pamela Brillante

Mrs. Atkins describes 4-year-old Kwan as “hard to handle.” She says, “Ever since he arrived in my preschool class, I’ve been at a loss. His parents claim Kwan knows some English, but he won’t use it with me. The other kids stay away from him because they never know when he’ll grab their toy or push them. At circle time, he just wanders around the room—no matter what strategies I use to engage him. How do I know if he is acting this way because he doesn’t understand us or because he really has some behavior problems? I just don’t know what to do!”

**It can be difficult for any teacher** to support a child whose behavior is disruptive, but a language barrier can certainly complicate the situation (Santos & Ostrosky n.d.). Mrs. Atkins confronts one of the toughest questions facing early childhood educators: How can we distinguish challenging behaviors that are temporary reactions to language differences from those that indicate something else, such as a possible developmental delay or learning disability? And what should we do about it?

Children communicate so much through their behavior. Understanding what their behavior is communicating can be difficult. Children who are new to English may not be able to tell us what’s going on. This makes it even more important for teachers to learn specific strategies to interpret the child’s actions and plan effective interventions.

### Factors to consider

There are no easy answers to these questions. Each dual language learner (DLL) comes with his or her own unique background that includes a variety of experiences and characteristics that can lead to challenging behaviors. In addition to language differences, there may be poverty, stress at home, or upheaval due to the immigration process and moving to a new country with a different culture. The child may have health issues such as allergies or chronic ear infections. Hesitancy or intensity may simply reflect individual personality traits. Even in monolingual children, language development and the ability to communicate can significantly affect behavior. For example, a child with a speech delay might act out due to frustration.

Finding solutions to challenging behaviors in dual language learners is like solving a puzzle because there are so many variables. In this article, we offer some helpful new resources and effective strate-

**Karen Nemeth**, EdM, is founder/lead consultant for Language Castle LLC, offering professional development and resources on teaching young dual language learners. She does presentations and consultation for early childhood programs throughout the country and is on the board of New Jersey Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages/New Jersey Bilingual Educators. Karen@languagecastle.com

**Pamela Brillante**, EdM, is an early childhood special education program development specialist for the New Jersey Department of Education and an adjunct instructor at William Paterson University in Wayne, New Jersey. She has done extensive training in positive behavior supports in preschool.

gies that teachers can try right away. To lay the foundation for the approaches suggested in this article, two factors are important to consider.

### Over- and under-identification

Spanish-speaking children are referred to special education in disproportionately high numbers, especially in schools where home language supports are withdrawn too quickly or not provided at all (Dray 2008). In other cases, dual language learners may be overlooked for special services because programs are unsure of their abilities because of language barriers. For children who exhibit challenging behaviors, educators must carefully consider the role of language differences, and the stress they can cause, before making a referral for assessment related to special education support and services. Determinations should be based on multiple measures, focusing on strong observation notes and interviews with parents. Use screening tools and standardized assessments with caution since some commercially available instruments are written only for children who speak English (Espinosa 2010). For more guidance on making these important decisions, see NAEYC's "Screening and Assessment of Young English Language Learners" (2005).

### The case for supporting the home language

Key findings from recent research make a clear case for continuing to support young children's home languages while also helping them learn English (Nemeth 2009a). Last year the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children released a revised position statement that addresses this issue with respect to children who have special needs:

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## Children have reasons for engaging in challenging behavior, and it is part of an educator's job to try to understand what they are trying to express.

Dual language learners, including those children with disabilities, should be afforded the opportunity to maintain their home language while also learning English as there is no scientific evidence that being bilingual causes or leads to language delay . . . Supporting a child's home language in fact acts as a linguistic resource and bridge to learning another language, even for children with disabilities. Research confirms that immersing DLLs fully in English when they are still in the active process of learning their home language actually has negative ramifications. (DEC 2010, 5–6)

### Types of challenging behaviors

Generally, behavior is a form of communication. Children have reasons for engaging in challenging behavior, and it is part of an educator's job to try to understand what they are trying to express. A child may find that his behavior is effective in getting him something he needs or wants, such as leaving an activity that makes him uncomfortable or getting extra attention from the teacher. It takes time and good detective skills to determine the function of a behavior.

Children who are unfamiliar with the language of the classroom may exhibit some of the following behaviors:

- acting out, aggression, frustration, anger, or resentment.

**Three-year-old Carlos, born in Mexico, attends a public school pre-K program. He is still learning his home language and has picked up many new words in English. Carlos enjoys playing alone in the block area, but recently began striking his peers with the blocks. His teacher, Miss Vivian, uses a variety of positive guidance techniques to address this behavior, but Carlos's use of aggression only gets worse. Carlos has now stopped using any of his new English words and is starting to use aggression during other routines and activities during the day. Miss Vivian decides to call on a trusted colleague to help her find more effective solutions for Carlos (see p. 16).**

- self-directed signs of stress, such as refusing to eat, having toileting accidents, biting themselves, or pulling their own hair.

**Parinita, from Sri Lanka, is new to the preschool class. She attempts to join in activities, but rarely seems to smile at mealtimes and eats very little. The teacher notices that there is a lot of table chatter that might make a child who is a DLL feel left out. She introduces the class to key words in Tamil, and the English speakers start paying more attention to their new friend as they practice speaking in her language.**

- withdrawal, sadness, isolation, depression, or being mute.

**Erek and Antoni, 3-year-olds from Poland, are both very quiet in their new American preschool. When their teacher reviews her observation notes, she realizes that neither boy has said a word in school for at least three weeks. Erek's parents report many lively conversations with him at home, so the teacher concludes that he is probably just experiencing a silent period as part of his transition to his new language. She notes that he shows progress in understanding what is said to him in English. Antoni is not only silent but also seems sad. He keeps to himself, at times just rocking back and forth in a chair. He participates very little in class activities, and his parents talk to the teacher about their concern. The teacher and family agree that Antoni seems to need more intensive intervention. The teacher refers him for assessment and he eventually receives special services.**

- ignoring directions, being rude or defiant, not listening or participating.

**From his first day in the program, Jean-Pierre seems to be in a world of his own. When the other children sit for circle time, he is elsewhere, pulling toys off the shelves. When it is time to dress for outdoor play, Jean-Pierre is busy studying the class pet. When his teacher tries to discuss his behavior with his parents, she realizes they speak little English. Surprised, she double-checks the enrollment form and sees that the family had indicated English as the home language. She realizes that it might have been challenging for the family to accurately complete an English-language form. The teacher vows to make at least one phone call to each new family from now on to confirm the information on the enrollment form.**

Any of these behaviors would cause concern in a preschool classroom. Whether caused by language differences or by more complex developmental or situational issues, behavioral problems often indicate that a child is unhappy and not doing well—and teachers want to help. Whatever may be going on with a particular child in distress, unaddressed language differences do not help. The situation creates challenges for teachers, but think about how that young child must feel—dropped off in a strange place for who knows how long with a room full of people he can't understand and who don't understand him.

Even before figuring out what may be causing the child's behaviors, a teacher can begin taking steps to ease the stress of language issues. If it turns out that language is the main cause of the problems, those steps will mean that progress toward improvement is well under way. If other factors are causing the problems, reducing language stress will make it easier for teacher and child to address those factors as well. Providing better language supports and working with the family to help the child deal with the stress of adjustment can result in a gradual decline of the problem behavior. If that doesn't happen, special education or social services may need to provide additional attention. If it seems that the child may have more significant issues, the educator may need to discuss with the family whether to refer the child for assessment. This may lead to a referral to specialists. The local early intervention program or school special education department can help determine if the child is eligible for an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) or an Individualized Education Program (IEP), which can include a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) and a specific behavior intervention plan.

## Prevent challenging behaviors before they start

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Here are some ways to prepare a welcoming environment for each new child.

1. Use a home language survey when each family enrolls, then get further details through meetings or phone conversations about the language(s) that are spoken by the child and family. This is the time to begin building a reciprocal relationship with the family so you can work as a team to support their child's development and learning.
2. Prepare a list of about 10 to 20 "survival" words or phrases that will help the child feel welcome, safe, and comfortable on his or her first day. (See "Survival Words and Phrases in English and Spanish," p. 16.) Learn the words in each child's language before he or she joins the class.
3. Provide materials that reflect the child's culture and/or are written in the child's home language. Using books, puzzles, posters, games, dramatic play props, and music in the classroom helps children see themselves as important members of the community.

**One teacher recalls how the children's faces lit up when they sang "Feliz Navidad" in December. It made her a little sad that she hadn't prepared to sing a Spanish song with them on their first day so she could have seen those smiles right away.**

4. Teach all of the children effective ways to communicate with their classmates who use different languages and have different abilities. Talk about being patient, speaking slowly and repeating, showing their friends what they are talking about, and learning their friends' language.

Tiffani approaches the newcomer and says slowly, “Hi! My language is English. Do you know English?” When the boy doesn’t respond, she says, “That’s OK, my other friend doesn’t know my language either.” Tiffani takes his hand and shows him the class pet.

5. Equip your classroom with a picture/symbol communication board (with words) so children can point to items to communicate more effectively.

## Observe and understand language and behavior differences

Skillful and thorough observation is the best way to understand challenging behaviors and develop plans for reducing them. Ask yourself some of the following questions so you can make changes that can help everyone have a better experience.

- Does the child engage in general and pretend play and interact like other children her age? If not, the challenges may be more developmental than language based.
- Does the child talk when spending time with another child or staff member who speaks his language? Is he happy and talkative at home? As long as his language seems on target in some circumstances, you can be sure he does not have a pervasive speech or language delay.
- Are other children teasing a child because she’s different? Teachers need to be sure bullying is not a factor, since it has been observed in children as young as 4, and children who do not speak the majority language are more likely to be victims (Chang et al. 2007).
- Is the child silent at school but talking happily when her grandmother comes to pick her up? According to Paradis, Genesee, and Crago (2010), a true language delay or disorder will affect both of the child’s languages in about the same way. If there is a lag in only one language, it is generally due to variations in the child’s exposure and motivation to learn one language over the other.

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**Skillful and thorough observation is the best way to understand challenging behaviors and develop plans for reducing them.**



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• Can you detect any particular triggers for the child's challenging behavior, such as large group activities in which she may feel lost and out of place? Changing classroom practice to be more responsive to language differences often results in better experiences for all of the children.

**Miss Vivian asks a colleague to help her learn how to chart Carlos's behavior to get the data needed to plan a response. They discover particular situations in which the behavior occurs and then hypothesize that the problem may stem from a language barrier in the class. Miss Vivian decides to develop a common classroom language—using pictures/symbols and words—to help Carlos and his peers communicate. She and her assistant work on facilitating positive interactions among all the children, and they continue to observe and document Carlos's behavior to see if this intervention is working.**

Understanding the triggers and results of the behaviors in question allows teachers to help the child learn replacement skills. Was the child really seeking help communicating with his peers? Try creating a common classroom language. Does it seem that the child is using his behavior to avoid an activity that seems intimidating? It may help to change the activity rather than changing the child's behavior.

### Adapting teaching strategies

Changing populations in early childhood settings require teachers to change their practice. It is not always easy for teachers to give up activities they have used for years, but what worked in the past may not be effective in classrooms that include children with language, behavior, or developmental differences. Here are some strategies that can boost the effectiveness of any preschool program that includes children with diverse abilities and language skills:

- Reduce the use of large group lessons and find more time for small groups and one-on-one interactions throughout the day.
- Speak slowly, avoid using slang, simplify sentences, and repeat key words often. Be patient, giving children time to process what you've said and respond.
- Use lots of nonverbal cues—gestures, sign language, facial expression, and changes in voice tone—to enhance communication.

### Survival Words and Phrases in English and Spanish

|                             |                                |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Hello                       | <i>Hola</i>                    |
| Friend                      | <i>Amigo</i>                   |
| Teacher                     | <i>La maestra</i>              |
| Bathroom                    | <i>El baño</i>                 |
| Eat                         | <i>Comer</i>                   |
| Play                        | <i>Jugar</i>                   |
| Drink                       | <i>Beber</i>                   |
| Wash                        | <i>Lavar</i>                   |
| Take a rest                 | <i>Tome un descanso.</i>       |
| Do you need help?           | <i>¿Necesita ayuda?</i>        |
| Does that hurt?             | <i>¿Te duele?</i>              |
| Pleased to meet you!        | <i>¡Mucho gusto!</i>           |
| Your mom will be back soon. | <i>Tu mama volverá pronto.</i> |

- Add graphic organizers such as props and pictures that add meaning to interactions.
- Assign language buddies. If there isn't another child in the class who speaks the same language, encourage a helpful, caring child to befriend the newcomer.
- Group together children who speak the same language because of the support they can provide both in terms of language practice and social relationships.
- Provide a comfortable place where a child can spend time playing alone without the constant pressure of trying to understand and be understood.
- Maintain a predictable schedule. Children may not understand your words, but if a dual language learner knows what's coming next, she is more able to participate appropriately and learn more effectively.
- Use lots of music and movement activities—in home languages as well as English—to engage all the children while building early language and literacy skills.
- Make the effort to get to know the families of dual language learners. They can help you make the child more comfortable in the classroom, help you recognize possible

**It is not always easy for teachers to give up activities they have used for years, but what worked in the past may not be effective in classrooms that include children with language, behavior, or developmental differences.**

signs of trouble, and support your efforts at home. Of course, they need your support as well.

- Develop strong, collaborative relationships with ESL and bilingual teachers as well as special education professionals and specialists who work with the program. To be most effective, their supports should take the form of consultations with the preschool teacher so he or she can embed and blend their strategies throughout the classroom and throughout the day (Nemeth 2009b).

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## Conclusion

The strategies that work with dual language learners also can be effective with any child who exhibits challenging behaviors. All of these strategies align with intentional teaching and developmentally appropriate practice. With good teamwork, ongoing professional development, and plenty of patience, helping young dual language learners adjust and succeed can be one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching.

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