Preschool Dual Language Learning—An Amazing Journey

Today
Today my preschool program is humming along. I hear children speaking loud and clear—in several different languages—laughing, singing and playing.

I try to keep up with them. My second language, Spanish, remains challenging. I draw on the assets all around: the talents of the parents and caregivers, the incredible abilities of my bilingual teaching assistant and the richness of the community that surrounds us. Together we are creating a nurturing, multi-cultural environment in which children and families are welcomed with open arms and where our young children develop two (or more!) languages.

All of this might sound a bit challenging, until we break it down and build it from the ground up. Let me start at the beginning.

Yesterday
Twenty years ago, I began teaching preschool, where the children spoke seven languages in all! Two things were perfectly clear: These children had a lot to say, and I needed help! I jumped into research on dual language learning and early childhood education, and I took a close look at my own values. The conclusion I reached was fairly straightforward: All children have the right to speak their heritage language, and the preschool setting is a perfect place to nurture the home language as well as English, needed for the academics that await. What came as a surprise was that supporting these languages and many cultures is an incredible journey—fun, creative and always evolving. Knowing much more now, I appreciate the tremendous work of researchers and educators, who have shared so freely in the field.

Now, after twenty years of exploring and learning, I am in a position to share from experience what works, what is fun and what is healthy in the long run for our dual language learners. Gladly, I provide professional development sessions to help support early childhood educators of dual language learners.

Our Professional Development Sessions
A quick look at statistics from the California Department of Education tells us that the population of dual language learners is growing at a fast clip. Therefore, it is paramount to bring our best practices for preschool dual language learning into clear focus. To help do just that, my partner and I have created professional development sessions on dual language learning. Using activities filmed in a variety of early childhood centers, our participants observe dual language learners and their teachers without having to travel to distant early childhood programs. These video clips along with interactive discussions address models for dual language learning and the stages and many strategies for second language acquisition. Our goal is to demystify the process of dual language learning by bringing early childhood centers into our professional development sessions—to see just how this all works.

Promoting the Heritage Language
In our professional developments we emphasize the foundational role of the heritage language and the respective cultures in which our children thrive. To understand this role, let me clarify two terms—dual language learner and English language learner. Basically, preschoolers who are only three, four or five years old, are still acquiring their home language. Importantly, the term dual language learner is a far more descriptive and meaningful term for these children, which gives us room for thought: What should our role be in promoting the home language and a second language, English? As challenging as this sounds, the answer is easy. Promote the home language in order to support the child’s acquisition of the second! Capitalizing on concept development in the home language assures that our preschoolers have access to content, as their English develops. As we explore big ideas in the home language, we add English—promoting dual language learning, leading to far more successful outcomes in the long run.

Sadly, if we fail to provide an avenue for dual language learning, many children
language development/dual language learners

lose the ability to speak the home language, compromising the parent-child relationship. Conversely, when we provide an avenue for preschool dual language learning and respond to the culture of the child and family, we convey a huge message: We value who you are. The message of validity is powerful, as our children go forward into formal schooling—secure in their identity and with a strong sense of belonging, pride and self-esteem.

Of course, when the children and teacher speak the same heritage language, it can be easy to support the home language. For example when all of our children speak Spanish, my teaching assistant and I dive in, conducting our activities in the home language at least fifty percent of the time. We see the cognitive and linguistic abilities flourish. As we know, home language development is the foundation for more rapid second language acquisition.

When supporting dual language learning for children from any language background, we can look to our families’ strengths and talents. Would the parents/caregivers like to start our day with us, reading with their children—in many languages? Could they make a quilt with the children or plant seeds with us, play music or make a photo album at the writing center? Could they record traditional chants and rhymes in the home language for our listening center or write the children’s names in Arabic or Korean, labeling our paintings around the room? Would they like to come with us on a walking trip to the Salvadorean, Guatemalan or Armenian bakery, where we’ll buy “lahmajun” and “borek” for a special treat?

We are waiting for Jasmine to return from Armenia. We can all locate Armenia on our globe now, along with China, Vietnam and Hungary—the funniest name for a country ever. From her trip, Jasmine will bring us a bit of money for our store, a toy, and a book in the Armenian language! We sent her a nice letter—with lots of stamps on it. From past family trips, we have musical instruments from Mexico and Central America, many fabrics for our bulletin boards, a rice cooker for arroz con leche, hand-made molinillos and lovely photos of our children all over the world.

Tomorrow

Charles Berlitz, the grandson of the founder of the Berlitz Language Schools, spoke four languages by age three. During his lifetime, spanning eighty-seven years, he learned over thirty different languages! I hope you will join this amazing journey, supporting our preschool dual language learners. For me, it is the journey of a lifetime.

Sally Durbin is a National Board Certified Teacher and holds a BCLAD and Administrative Credential. In 2007 she and her partner, Phil Bedel, co-founded the non-profit, Teaching At The Beginning, Inc., to provide professional development sessions to educators of preschool dual language learners. She has presented to NAEYC, CAEYC, LAUP, UCLA Early Care and Education, UCLA Extension, CSUN, Santa Monica College, LAUSD, Camino Nuevo Charter Academy, Teach for America and Head Start. For the past twenty years she has worked with preschool dual language learners and their families in the Los Angeles Unified School District. She can be reached at: pbedel@pacbell.net or (818) 907-9560.