

Dual Language in Early Education Best for Youngest ELLs, Report Says

By Lesli A. Maxwell - May 14, 2013

Young English-language learners who are still developing oral and literacy skills in their home languages benefit most in early-childhood programs that regularly expose them to both languages.

That's one of several major takeaways in a new federally funded analysis of the large, and growing, population of dual-language learners, ranging from birth to 5, already enrolled in, or headed for, early-childhood-education programs.

The analysis, released today, also underscores that dual-language learners develop language skills differently than their monolingual, English-speaking peers. Young dual-language learners, who are using two separate language systems, will take longer to reach proficiency in both languages than their peers learning only one.

"Their development is different," said Dina C. Castro, one of the report's lead authors. "It's not better, it's not worse, just different. We need to understand their development by looking at all the other factors that surround them that will also interact with their ability to learn." Too often, Castro said, dual-language learners' school readiness gaps in kindergarten are assumed to be language related, rather stemming from other factors, such as poverty.

Done by researchers affiliated with the Center for Early Care and Education Research—Dual-Language Learners, the analysis is a summary of more than 200 studies, including research done at the center itself, that shed light on how dual-language environments and bilingualism impact language and cognitive development in young children and how early-childhood practices can hinder or help dual-language learners. The center, based at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, started its work in 2009 and is funded through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the federal agency that oversees public early-childhood programs for poor children, namely Head Start and Early Head Start.

Many existing dual-language programs for young learners are currently found in Head Start and Early Head Start, which established standards that require its providers to address the needs of dual-language learners and "principles" that direct Head Start programs to develop children's first languages, as well as English. Some state-provided early-learning programs—Illinois, for example—also require development of home languages and English.

Overall, however, there are few early-childhood programs that feature what the researchers call "intentional" home language instruction and support.

Their review also highlights early-childhood practices that have shown the most impact on dual-language learners.

Among those: Using the home language of young children, in addition to English, is probably "the most important aspect" of effective early-childhood education for dual-language learners. And when early-childhood classrooms emphasize English-language development only, a dual-language learners' first-language skills can decline and harm their progress toward English-language proficiency later.

"Young children really benefit when they are exposed to two languages, there is a good research base for that conclusion," said Linda M. Espinosa, an author on the report. "But children need to also be exposed to English in those early years."

Espinosa, a retired professor of early-childhood education at the University of Missouri-Columbia who has written extensively on young dual-language learners, said dual-language programs in early-childhood settings "vary enormously." Many classrooms, for example, don't have fully bilingual teachers, she said, but still offer frequent opportunities for children to hear, speak, and interact in their first language.

The report recommends the expansion and availability of dual-language environments in early-care-and-education programs. To do that, the authors write, will require federal and state policymakers to support more preparation and training programs for early-childhood educators to support the literacy and language development of young dual-language learners. The authors also say there needs to be much tighter coordination between early-childhood programs and K-12 systems, so that the early dual-language development skills aren't lost once children move to kindergarten and beyond.

Eugene E. García, an emeritus professor of education at Arizona State University and the former head of the office of bilingual education in the U.S. Department of Education when Bill Clinton was president, said the research shows clearly that language development problems for young English-learners crop up when support for their home language is not provided. "It's counterintuitive," said García, also a lead author on the analysis. "But building the literacy and language skills in the first language helps students build their proficiency skills in English."

That conclusion is still debated in some circles, especially because of the controversial nature of children being taught in any language other than English. Certainly, the focus of federal education policy for K-12 English-learners for years has been squarely on them acquiring English and not on developing their first language to become fully bilingual/biliterate. So maybe the early-childhood folks will be the ones to help change the conversation about language learning and the best practices to pursue in the K-12 realm, especially in the earliest grades when language is still developing.

García thinks the potential is there. "We haven't made much headway in reducing the achievement gaps for English-learners," under current policy, he said.