

New Ideas Guide Early English Learning

Learning two languages at the same time can help, not harm children

Jason Perez's 8-year-old daughter speaks Spanish and English and reads and writes Arabic. Her father says immersing his daughter in multiple languages has given her a broader world view. And doing so did not overwhelm or confuse her.

Such experiences are supported by a growing body of research that challenges much of the conventional thinking about young English language learners and offers insight into how to best educate non-English speaking students so they can achieve full English fluency and academic success.

An Emerging National Issue

Addressing the education of young English language learners is emerging as an urgent national issue as school districts across the country experience a dramatic increase in the number of these students.

Some Southern states have seen 300-400 percent increases in the number of children from non-English speaking homes. Recent studies report that in some parts of the country, these children make up more than half of the preschool population.

For the better part of the past two decades, the immigration patterns and rising populations of non-English speaking families seen across the nation largely bypassed western Pennsylvania. When some 13 million immigrants streamed into the U.S. during the 1990s, fewer than 25,000 found their way to this region, according to a 2002 Duquesne University workforce study.

Today, however, there are signs more non-English speaking families with young children are calling the region home.

Several family support centers in Allegheny County are seeing more families with young English language learners enter their programs, particularly the Prospect Park center, where children representing more than 20 nationalities are among those enrolled, said Sheila Beasley, University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development family support outreach director.

"First and foremost, the parents want their children to master the English language," Beasley said. "And what usually happens very quickly is that as the children master the language, they help teach the language to their parents."

The good news is that new insights into early language development that can be useful in creating more effective

In some parts of the country, young, non-English speaking children make up more than half of the preschool population. More non-English speaking families with young children are even coming to live in western Pennsylvania, which had for decades one of the slowest-growing immigrant populations.

policies and practices have emerged as a result of advances in neuroscience, research on dual language development, early childhood program evaluations and international studies on multilingual development.

Family Differences Matter

Ages three to eight are critical years for children's learning of sound, structure and functions of language. It is during this period that language development can be significantly influenced by home, family and other circumstances.

Significant differences are seen among early English language learners in regard to the kinds of circumstances that influence language development. Key factors include the language spoken at home, fluency of the home language, the extent of their exposure to English, their family values and customs, and their age and family socioeconomic status.

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These differences suggest that a single program model isn't able to address such diverse populations and circumstances, and that the effectiveness of an intervention may hinge on the ability to adapt to the specific needs of the children it is intended to serve.

Despite differences in children's circumstances, research strongly suggests that, as a group, young English language learners are very capable of learning subject matter in two languages and may experience cognitive gains by being exposed to more than one language early in life.

Deflating The Myths

One of the most common beliefs is that learning two languages as a young child will lead to confusion and may slow progress toward becoming fluent in English. Studies suggest, however, that the opposite is actually true.

Most researchers agree that bilingual infants develop two separate but connected linguistic systems during the first year of life. And recent research suggests that learning two languages early in childhood results in the development of greater brain tissue density in areas important to language, memory and attention.

This increased brain activity and neural density may have a long-term, positive impact on certain cognitive abilities, such as focusing on details of a task and understanding how language is structured and used.

Lucas Musewe has experienced first-hand how mastering multiple languages sharpens the understanding of structure and usage. Musewe, manage-

ment information systems director for Partnerships in Family Support, grew up in Kenya, where children learn three languages during childhood: the mother tongue; the national language, which is Swahili; and English.

In fact, most children in the world learn more than one language in their early years. "It's not detrimental to the child," said Musewe. "It's a skill and people have to realize that it is a skill."

Another common belief holds that the best way for these children to learn English is to immerse them in English from their preschool years through third grade. Again, the research raises serious doubts about that approach.

Recent evidence shows that supporting the home language during children's preschool years will help, not hinder, their progress toward becoming fluent in English. On the other hand, research suggests that completely shifting children to English while they are still learning and have

not yet mastered their first language may slow their learning of English and depress their academic achievement.

The notion that native English language speaking children will experience academic and language setbacks if enrolled in dual language programs is also refuted by the research.

Recent studies suggest, for example, that a dual language approach benefits both English language learners and their English-speaking peers by exposing all children to two languages and by promoting bilingualism and an understanding of other cultures.

Studies also suggest that, while it may be challenging, programs can adopt effective strategies that support the language spoken in the child's home even when teachers and staff don't speak the child's home language. "So much of the responsibility is with the parents. But our society also has a responsibility to be adaptable, respectful and accommodating of other language," Beasley said.



references

This report was based on interviews and the following publications:

Espinosa, L.M. (2008). Challenging common myths about young English language learners. *Foundation for Child Development Policy Brief 8*. www.fcd-us.org/usr_doc/MythsOfTeachingELLEspinosa.pdf

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