



National Committee
for Effective Literacy



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Early Literacy Development and Instruction for Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Education

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OVERVIEW

This Executive Summary synthesizes the major findings and recommendations of “Early Literacy Development and Instruction for Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Education.” The National Committee on Effective Literacy published the full paper and this Executive Summary to inform early childhood practitioners, educational leaders, curriculum developers, and policymakers about early literacy development and effective literacy instruction for young children learning English as a new language in early childhood classrooms. These 7.4 million emerging bilingual children— frequently referred to as dual language learners (DLLs)—make up roughly 33% of all children under age six in the United States. Given the critical mass of this growing population and the significant role that early childhood education (ECE) plays in the children’s future academic success, current concerns about literacy education and efforts to strengthen this instruction must be informed by sound research about language and literacy development and effective instructional practices for DLLs. This view has implications for federal and state education policy, teacher and leadership preparation, and professional development efforts. Support will be needed to implement developmentally appropriate instructional approaches and curricula designed to embrace the assets and address the needs of young DLLs using culturally and linguistically appropriate assessments.

Literacy development is fundamental to further academic learning, but, more importantly, for the power it provides people to function in a literate society. Early childhood education has the critical role of building young children’s early language and literacy, including dual language learners’ multilingual and multiliteracy skills. Yet current literacy development trends reflect a reductionist literacy orientation overly focused on discrete reading skills in early childhood classrooms at the cost of more well-rounded, developmentally appropriate, and culturally and linguistically responsive practices. Furthermore, current literacy practices neither recognize nor respond to the specific assets and needs of DLLs, teaching them instead in an English-centric approach and instructing as if they were monolingual learners. When ECE supports home language development and cultural connections in literacy education, it positively impacts dual language learners’ later school success. When these supports do not exist, both language and literacy development is hampered, and DLLs suffer language loss which not only denies them the cognitive and economic benefits of bilingualism, but it can also negatively impact later literacy development, healthy identity development, and family connectedness.

The full paper is divided into four sections:

- **SECTION 1: Building Shared Understanding: Connections Between Language, Culture, and Literacy**
- **SECTION 2: The Dangers of a Narrowed Approach to Early Learning and Early Literacy**
- **SECTION 3: Research-Based Practices for Dual Language Learners’ Literacy Development**
- **SECTION 4: Conclusions and Recommendations**

This Executive Summary focuses on key points from sections three and four.

Research-Based Practices For Dual Language Learners' Literacy Development

Dual language learners develop language as an overall capacity and absorb and internalize the specific structures, rhythms, sounds, and vocabulary that comprise the language systems of two early literacy development. Effective early language and literacy development approaches for young DLLs must be built on a research base that combines all of the following: knowledge about early childhood development, including how children learn and develop language; understanding what constitutes developmentally appropriate early literacy instruction and the precursor skills to literacy; and, specific knowledge about literacy and the bilingual brain, second language acquisition, and multilingual learners.

Effective early language and literacy development for dual language learners is fostered through planned language approaches—sometimes called program models—that define how a child's dual languages are to be accommodated and developed. Typical models include:

- *Bilingual programs (including dual language education one-way and two-way programs);*
- *Programs in English with English Language Development (ELD, also known as English as a Second Language or ESL) instruction, that also provide home language support.*

Too often, however, children are instead enrolled in General Education programs taught in English with no specialized language supports. General education programs in English with no specialized instruction or supports do not provide the necessary support systems for DLLs to succeed academically and develop a strong foundation in literacy and oral language.

Articulating a specific, planned dual language approach assures coherence and consistency in early literacy development for DLLs. Regardless of which language program or approach is selected, effective early literacy skill development for dual language

learners begins with recognizing that there are two languages involved and that a strong home language is the foundation for a strong second language. Ideally, initial literacy exposure and instruction should occur in the child's strongest language, where they have the strongest base of oral language and where text will have the strongest meaning. Effective literacy approaches ensure that children maintain their home language while learning to speak and read English. In addition, research suggests that a sound instructional approach to early literacy instruction in an early childhood education classroom, at a minimum, includes the following five components.

1 A Language-Rich and Print-Rich Environment

An environment that is language-rich and print-rich is particularly important for dual language learners developing literacy in a second language. It provides children ample opportunities to connect print to spoken language, develops print awareness, and fosters familiarity with the language in oral and written forms. Children from preschools where there is extensive access to and interaction with printed matter (e.g., through adult read-alouds and class libraries) have a head start in literacy socialization compared to children with fewer opportunities to interact with print during their early years. Print immersion is one of the aspects of early childhood education with the largest effect size in predicting and supporting later literacy skills.

2 Active, Positive Engagement with Text in the Home Language and English

Part of becoming a reader is understanding the uses and purposes of text as well as the power of text to communicate, convey information, narrate, and entertain. Children become readers because they experience print as useful for their own objectives and books as beneficial or enjoyable. This is how they become increasingly socialized to literacy, know the purposes and gifts of reading, and come to understand that literacy has applications in and across their linguistic and cultural worlds. For DLLs, this means creating a print immersive and engaging environment using books and other printed matter in both their languages.

3 Rich Oral Language and Wide Vocabulary Development in Both Languages

Early literacy development builds on the foundation of a strong base of oral language and vocabulary in both the home language and English, acquired through hearing and producing the languages in the context of relationships and interaction while exploring and learning about the world. The more expressive, complex, and precise the language that children hear (in both the home language and English), and the greater the extent and authenticity of the language they hear, the more expressive, complex, and precise their own language will be as they use it to meet their individual needs. Oral language is the foundation for literacy. DLLs with strong verbal language skills and vocabulary in their home language are positioned to engage in the mechanics of reading, including being able to recognize sounds, words, and structures of meaningful language. For DLLs developing early literacy in English, providing opportunities for oral language practice and building their background knowledge in English are crucial to effecting successful early literacy instruction. These practices help children connect meaning to the association of sounds and text.

4 Phonological Awareness in and Through Both Languages

Phonological awareness, the ability to hear the sounds of a language, is a precursor to word reading ability. During the emergent literacy phase—as children establish their oral language and their early phonological awareness—dual language learners develop an increasingly sophisticated comparative understanding of each of their languages. They must be provided extensive opportunities to hear and be engaged in each language separately and authentically.

5 Building Cross-Linguistic Connections and Metalinguistic Awareness

The degree to which children are supported in the process of sorting out and building metalinguistic awareness and specific language/literacy systems, the more successful they can be in leveraging the two languages and engaging in literacy in each language. Whether it is developing concepts of print (how print works and how it may differ across languages), alphabetic knowledge (that the same letters may have different sounds in different languages), or early decoding—ECE teachers' deep understanding is paramount. In particular, they need to understand the comparative features of the languages spoken by learners and apply this knowledge using strategies to build cross-language connections, support language transfer, and create translanguaging learning spaces to enhance and deepen literacy education for dual language learners.

Important contextual features also contribute to the effective development of literacy for DLLs. The following conditions facilitate dual language learners' motivation and engagement with books, and enhance their development of early literacy skills:

- *Literacy development integrated with content learning (e.g., through thematic units)*
- *High quality relevant and culturally inclusive/responsive texts and materials*
- *An affirming and inclusive climate of support for home language, culture, and bilingualism.*

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For young children whose home languages are other than English, the research points unequivocally to the need for explicit attention to their home language(s) as well as English and to the fact that the literacy development for them is different from literacy development for monolingual English-speaking children. A comprehensive and successful early literacy approach for dual language learners begins with the clear articulation of a planned language approach that provides clarity to staff members about how to engage a child's dual language capacities most effectively.

Given the unparalleled role that early childhood education plays in building early language and literacy skills for all young children, adopting pedagogical approaches grounded in biliteracy and second language acquisition is imperative for dual language learners' school success. Research points to critical characteristics of quality early childhood programs for dual language learners that include their home language and culture. To that end, any plans should fully engage DLLs' families as educational partners and implement linguistically and culturally responsive approaches that recognize linguistic and cultural diversity as an asset, not a deficit, for young children. Rejecting a developmentally inappropriate and English-centric approach is essential if we are to educate DLLs successfully with the literacy skills they need to participate, thrive, and lead in and across their multiple language and cultural worlds.

We offer the following set of recommendations for early childhood educators, school/district leaders, researchers, and policymakers in adopting best practices for dual language learner early literacy education:

Strengthen early childhood teacher and leadership preparation and professional development.

Require coursework in second language acquisition and assessment, biliteracy methods, and ELD/ESL in early childhood education and leadership licensure programs. Provide scholarship/tuition incentives for early childhood teachers and leaders to earn their bilingual education and/or ELD/ESL endorsements. Ensure that all early childhood educators—not just bilingual and ELD/ESL teachers—participate in extended professional development on dual language learner education.

Provide effectual DLL-appropriate instruction, materials, and curriculum.

Adopt a comprehensive early literacy approach for dual language learners that is grounded in the latest conclusive research and theory in second language acquisition and biliteracy. Ensure early childhood pre-literacy practices are developmentally appropriate and focused on the precursors to literacy, not on explicit and discrete "reading skills." Follow a curriculum and implement literacy instruction that is culturally and linguistically responsive and developmentally appropriate. Utilize instructional materials that reflect the languages and cultures of the classroom community in authentic ways to develop learners' languages, biliteracy skills, and conceptual understanding. Ensure plentiful access to and daily engagement with books and print in both the home language and English. Differentiate instruction based on children's second language proficiency levels and include specific second and dual language learning objectives supporting ELD/ESL state standards. Value families' varied home literacy practices, including oral literacies, as culturally and linguistically bound assets to be tapped and integrated into classroom instruction.

Utilize linguistically and culturally appropriate assessments, including, whenever possible, native language assessments.

Ensure assessments used with dual language learners have been normed on this population. When assessments that haven't been normed on DLLs are used, ensure that these results are interpreted with extreme caution and that they are considered alongside other evidence from more reliable assessments. Reevaluate inappropriate school readiness indicators that drive expectations and curriculum, prioritize academic readiness over developmental benchmarks, and are based on an English-centric orientation.

■ **Create a DLL-responsive literacy policy.**

For dual language learners, base policy decisions on research about DLL-language and literacy development, including a focus on the development of bilingualism and biliteracy. Avoid approaches based on monolingual English speakers that do not sufficiently address second language acquisition and its connection to English literacy development. Include bilingual education and biliteracy researchers and experts early in any national, state, and/or local policy efforts that legislate or mandate pedagogical practices for DLL. Ensure their expertise informs decisions that affect access to linguistically and culturally responsive education for dual language learners. Build state capacity to deliver DLL-responsive language and literacy education through policies that focus on increasing the bilingual ECE teacher pipeline and partnering with universities to provide bilingual education and ELD/ESL endorsements.

■ **Support continuing research and knowledge development on DLL early literacy.**

Broadly disseminate seminal and current research on early childhood bilingualism and second language acquisition, early biliteracy development, and linguistically and culturally responsive education. Expand research on the benefits of maintaining/developing children's first language and culture as an integral part of their long-term academic success. Conduct large-scale empirical research on the effects of the English-centric, discrete skills orientation of the "science of reading" on dual language learners' short- and long-term literacy development, academic achievement, and overall school performance.

Dual language learners come to early childhood classrooms with a plethora of linguistic and cultural assets. Early childhood educators who incorporate and further develop these assets to support multilingual and multiliteracy skills help to set young dual language learners up for success.

To read the full report, visit:

https://multilingualliteracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/NCEL_ECE_White_Paper.pdf



**National Committee
for Effective Literacy**

The National Committee for Effective Literacy (NCEL) uplifts research, policies and practices to ensure that English learner/emergent bilingual students leave school as proficient readers and writers in English and preferably more languages and who thrive and succeed in school and their communities. We are researchers, teacher educators, teachers, administrators, school board members and advocates from across the nation with deep expertise in literacy and the education of English learners/emergent bilingual students.

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