

# What Early Childhood Educators Need to Know: Developing Effective Programs for Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Children and Families

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Photos courtesy of the author.

One day at the water table in a preschool classroom two four-year-olds—Naoshi, whose home language is Japanese, and Byong-sun, whose home language is Korean—were playing side by side. They were building a structure with two plastic bottles with a tube running between them. At one point the tube flipped out of one of the bottles, and Naoshi started to help Byong-sun put it back together. But as he lifted one of the bottles, Byong-sun protested, "Stop! Stop!" and when Naoshi didn't stop, Byong-sun took the tube out of the bottle himself. Then Naoshi picked up the tube and again tried to insert it in the bottle. Byong-sun started to help him, saying "OK?" When the structure collapsed again, Byong-sun said, "Uh-oh." As they continued their play, Byong-sun called Naoshi's attention to what he was doing by saying, "Hey." And Naoshi replied, "OK, OK, OK, OK, OK, OK, OK."

This vignette captures an important moment when two second-language-learning preschoolers have developed enough useful terms in their new, mutual language—English—so they can communicate with each other during play.

But this did not happen in the first, second, or even third month in their preschool classroom. In fact, it didn't occur until the children had been attending the preschool for five months. During the intervening time, both Naoshi and Byong-sun had participated in a lengthy and complicated process of getting used to a new culture and a new language before they could begin to feel comfortable and included in their preschool classroom.

During that time I was able to observe and audiotape in their preschool classroom, so I could see the process as it unfolded. In this article I explore the second-language-learning process from the point of view of what early childhood educators need to know to understand and help young second-language-learning children. Throughout I will refer to young children who are learning English as a second language, as second-language learners or as children from homes where English is not the primary language. In neither of these cases is the terminology meant to imply that I do not value the home languages spoken by the children and families. In fact, I believe it is critically important that young children maintain and continue

to develop their home languages (Tabors 1997, Chapters 8 and 10).

## A growing population of second-language learners

There is a growing population of children in the United States whose primary language is not English. Most early childhood educators are aware of this fact, but statistics are difficult to find. One source of information is the bilingual/multicultural survey of Head Start programs that was conducted under the sponsorship of the Administration for Children, Youth and Families in 1994. This survey found that 91% of the responding programs reported an increase in at least one cultural or linguistic group in the last five years. The survey reported that 74% of Head Start children spoke English at home, 22% of the children spoke Spanish at home, and 4% of the children came from families who spoke any one of 139 other languages (SocioTechnical Research Applications 1996).

The Head Start population, of course, is only a fraction of the young children in preschool programs in the United States. One estimate (Kagan & Garcia 1991)—that may well be an underestimation by now—is that there will be 5.2 million other-than-English-dominant preschoolers in the United States by the year 2000.

## Programs for children whose home language is not English

There are three main types of programs: first-language classrooms, bilingual classrooms, and English-language classrooms (see table below).

A first-language program is one in which the child's home language is the only language used in the classroom. This type of program helps develop the child's first language without exposing the child to English in the classroom. Supporters of first-language classrooms (Wong Fillmore 1991) believe that they play a critical role in helping children maintain their first language at an age when language loss is a real possibility. This type of classroom is the least frequently available.

The second type of classroom—bilingual classrooms—may involve a wide range of different configurations, but its main feature is that there is a match between the home language of the children and the language spoken by at least one of the

adults in the classroom. For a classroom to be truly bilingual, however, there should be a plan for the use of the two languages—home language and English—so that children are exposed to appropriate language models in both languages. This type of classroom is available in communities where there are children and educators who come from the same first-language background, such as Spanish.

By far the most typical classroom situation for children from homes where English is not the primary language, however, is their being placed in an English-language classroom. Here there may be children from a variety of first-language backgrounds, and children who share the same first language may use that language when they play together. However, for the most part, English is the main language of interaction for both the children and the teachers. In this type of classroom, children from homes where English is not spoken will not have their home language maintained

or developed within the context of the classroom.

## Social isolation and linguistic constraints

Children from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds may face social isolation and linguistic constraints in the classroom. Particularly in an English-language classroom, the child who does not yet understand or speak English may find it difficult to interact appropriately with children and teachers because of the lack of a mutual language. This often results in the child being treated as nearly invisible, or like a baby, by other children, leading to frustration or withdrawal. Adding to their difficulties is the fact that children in this situation have very few options for communicating, except nonverbally.

They are caught in what I call the double bind of second-language learning: To learn a new language,

<i>Types of Early Childhood Education Settings for Children Whose Home Language Is Not English</i>			
	<b>First-language classroom</b>	<b>Bilingual classroom</b>	<b>English-language classroom</b>
<b>Teachers</b>	Native speakers of L1*	Bilingual in L1 and English or native speaker of L1 paired with native speaker of English	Native speakers of English
<b>Children</b>	Native speakers of L1	All native speakers of L1 or mixture of L1 and English speakers or bilingual speakers of L1 and English or mixture of bilingual speakers and English speakers	Native speakers of L1 or native speakers of different L1s or either of above and English speakers
<b>Language of interaction</b>	All interaction in L1	Interaction split between L1 and English	All interaction in English (except between children with common L1s)
<b>Language outcomes</b>	Development of L1; no development of English	Maintenance or development of L1, while also developing English	Development of English; little or no maintenance or development of L1
*L1= Any language other than English			

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you have to be socially accepted by those who speak the language; but to be socially accepted, you have to be able to speak the new language. Fortunately, most children develop strategies for escaping this double-bind, but early childhood educators need to be aware that social isolation and linguistic constraints are frequently a feature of young second-language learners' early experience in a setting where their home language is not available to them.

### The developmental sequence of second-language acquisition

There is a specific developmental sequence for second-language acquisition in early childhood settings.

**Home language use.** Children may continue to speak their home language with those who speak that language. They may also continue to speak their home language with others who don't speak their language, because they have not yet discovered that there is a new language being used in this new setting. For these children it may take time to come to an understanding that this language that they are hearing is, in fact, a different language from the one they hear and use at home.

**Nonverbal period in the new language.** When children realize that

their home language doesn't always work, they give up using it with those who don't understand them, but they don't stop communicating. Crying, whimpering, whining, pointing, and miming are all nonverbal requests used during this period. These techniques are, of course, most effective with understanding adults.

To become full members of the classroom, children will need strategies for moving beyond the nonverbal period. Most children do this by using the nonverbal period to start collecting information by watching and listening intently—spectating—and talking to themselves—rehearsing—in preparation for going public in their new language.

**Telegraphic and formulaic language.** For most young children learning a second language, breaking out of the nonverbal period means using a combination of telegraphic and formulaic language. Telegraphic language is concise, often one-word usage of the language, such as naming people or objects or reciting the alphabet and numerals. When a child uses catch phrases for getting into and out of social situations like the ones used by Naoshi and Byong-sun (no, yes, uh-oh, OK, hey, mine, lookit, bye-bye, excuse me, I don't know), this is an example of formulaic language. The use of these two types of language helps children get into the flow of the activities in the classroom. They begin to sound like members of the group.

**Productive use of the new language.** A child begins the process of building her own unique sentences by combining formulaic phrases and the names of objects. She describes an activity ("I do a ice cream"), an idea ("I got a big"), or a need ("I want a playdough"). Because she is no longer using memorized phrases ("hey, what's going on here?"), it may seem that her language ability has actually decreased because there will be many more mistakes ("me's doctor") as she figures out how English works.

### A cumulative process

As children progress through the developmental sequence outlined above, they will not give up earlier phases as they move into new ones except for giving up the use of their home language with those who don't speak it. In other words, second language learning children will keep aspects of previous types of communicative use, even as they move on to the next phase. For example, I was building a house out of plastic blocks with Leandro, a five-year-old whose home language is Portuguese, and had the following conversation (A is author; L is Leandro).

L: I need help.

A: OK. What do you need help with?

L: To—to building a house.

A: Well, I have to start with a wall.

L: I make them apart.

A: You're making a what?

L: Part.

A: Apart? You're going to *take* them apart? OK. Let's see if we can get this door here.

L: How?

A: We have to go up to the top here . . . We need the . . . lintel (pushing pieces around).

L: And what is for that (showing me a piece)?

A: That's for the corners.

L: For the what?

A: Corner. To go around a corner. Oh, look at this nice big long one. I'm looking for something to go on top of my door.

L: Look at one like that (pointing to a piece), and one like that (pointing again). (Pause) Lot of windows . . .

A: You need a lot of windows?

L: The house has a lot of windows. (Pause) I know what, why have windows.

A: Why?

L: Cuz to we can see outside.

A: That's true.

L: It's tru-u-u-e.

**The population of young children from families whose primary language is not English is growing. You may have some of these children in your classroom.**

A: You couldn't see outside if you didn't have a window, right?  
(Pause) Do you think it would be very dark inside, Leandro, without a window? It would be dark, wouldn't it?

L: Yeah... (Pause) And we have to do it like that (pointing to the picture of a house).

A: Really big?

L: Yeah.

A: We'll have the world's biggest house, huh?

L: Like—(gesturing with his hands like a roof).

A: You mean with a roof?

L: Yeah...

A: OK. That looks like it's going to be hard.

L: Yes. How we going to put it...?

A: I don't know.

L: I think we're going to do it with windows.

A: OK. We'll have a solar roof.

In this sequence, Leandro uses nonverbal communication (pointing to the picture and to the pieces, as well as indicating *roof* nonverbally), as well as formulaic (“yeah,” “like...,” and “I need help”) and telegraphic (“windows”) communication, although he is operating almost entirely in productive language (making whole sentences even if they are not totally correct English). Note that his questions are not completely or always formed correctly and there are vocabulary items (*apart, corner*) that he doesn't understand.

However, Leandro's English skills are advanced enough so that he is able to deal with these problems easily and continue the conversation.

**There are three main types of programs for children whose home language is not English: (1) first-language programs (where only the child's home language is used in the classroom), (2) bilingual programs (two languages are used regularly), and (3) English-language classrooms.**

The sequence in which he asks the rhetorical question “Why have windows?” shows the level of sophistication that he is capable of even in this language that he is just learning.

This conversation with Leandro demonstrates what an adventure it can be to communicate with second-language learners, as it is always a guess as to what language forms and vocabulary they may or may not understand. This is why I think of young second-language-learners' abilities in their new language as extremely volatile. If they have both the language forms and the vocabulary to express themselves, they can seem extremely advanced. But missing pieces can make communication difficult. High-pressure situations—such as being called on in front of a group—or emotionally charged situations—when they are upset or excited—can make even the most confident second-language learners unable to communicate effectively. Individual differences

Leandro was the child who gained the most control over English during the year I was an observer in his preschool classroom. His achievements illustrate the individual differences that children bring to the second-language-learning process.

- Leandro's *motivation* to learn English was high because his parents and two older brothers were already bilingual in Portuguese and English and he had many English-speaking playmates.

- He had considerable *exposure* to English, both at the preschool he

attended five mornings a week and in his neighborhood.

- He was one of the *older* children in the classroom, therefore he was able to bring more advanced cognitive and social skills to the second-language-learning process.

- Leandro had a very outgoing *personality* and quickly attracted input in English both from adults and from other children.

It is important to think about how these four factors—motivation, exposure, age, and personality—may affect an individual child's progress in acquiring a second language. Some young children are not motivated to undertake the task of learning a second language at all if, for instance, they know that they are only visitors in this country and will be going home soon. Younger children may move more slowly through the process because they have less well-developed social and cognitive strategies. Or, like Leandro, a child may have all factors working in combination to help speed the process of second-language acquisition.

## **Support for second-language acquisition in the classroom**

There are ways early childhood educators can support and facilitate the second-language-acquisition process in the classroom. The developmental sequence outlined earlier can be influenced by how the teachers in the classroom organize the physical space, how they and the English-speaking children in the class interact with the second-language learners, and what types of activities they choose to present to the class.

**Classroom organization.** Two aspects of classroom organization can help second-language-learning children. The first is to have a set routine for activities so that second-language-learning children can catch on and get into the flow of events. This

will help them feel more comfortable and look like members of the group more quickly, aiding in their social integration.

The second is to provide safe havens in the classroom. These can be a table with manipulatives, a quiet house area, or a puzzle corner that are available at all times. Second-language-learning children can spend some time away from the communicatively demanding activities and develop competency in other skill areas besides language. Also, having a safe haven will help the children feel less pressured to communicate in a language they don't yet know and will give them a vantage point from which to watch and listen until they are ready to join in.

**Language techniques.** When teachers interact with young second-language learners they automatically use a variety of techniques to help get their message across. These include (1) using lots of nonverbal communication, (2) keeping the message simple, (3) talking about the here and now, (4) emphasizing the important words in a sentence, (5) combining gestures with talk, and (6) repeating certain key words in a sentence. One teacher has characterized this type of communication as "toddler talk" or the kind of communication that a teacher would use with preverbal children. Using this kind of communication with second-language learners

**Early childhood educators need to be aware that social isolation and linguistic constraints are frequently a feature of young second-language learners' early experience in a setting where their home language is not available to them.**

helps them begin to understand what is being said in the new language.

Teachers can also enlist the English-speaking children in the classroom to help with this process (Hirschler 1994). In many classrooms, English-speaking children do not understand why a particular child is not eager to join in their play, so they leave that child out of the group. If the teacher explains that this is a child who comes from a home where he has learned another language, it will help all the children develop understanding about language. Suggestions about how the children can help will develop pro-social skills. A buddy-system setup can pair an outgoing English-speaking child with a second-language learner. Engineering the seating arrangement at snack or lunch, so that English-speaking children and a second-language learner are seated together, will help the child get into social contact more quickly.

**Classroom activities.** How classroom activities are structured can also make a difference. In most developmental programs there are activity times when a teacher works closely with children and materials. The teacher can use a running commentary technique: "Now I'm going to put the flour in the bowl" or "Byong-sun is putting the cheese on his pizza." During reading time the teacher can choose predictable books, which are particularly useful for second-language learners, and organize times when work with a small group of children makes it easier to tailor the book to the audience.

At other group times, using the same songs and movements repeatedly can help second-language learners tune in. This is often when a second-language learner first finds her "voice" in her new language and feels comfortable in a group situation.

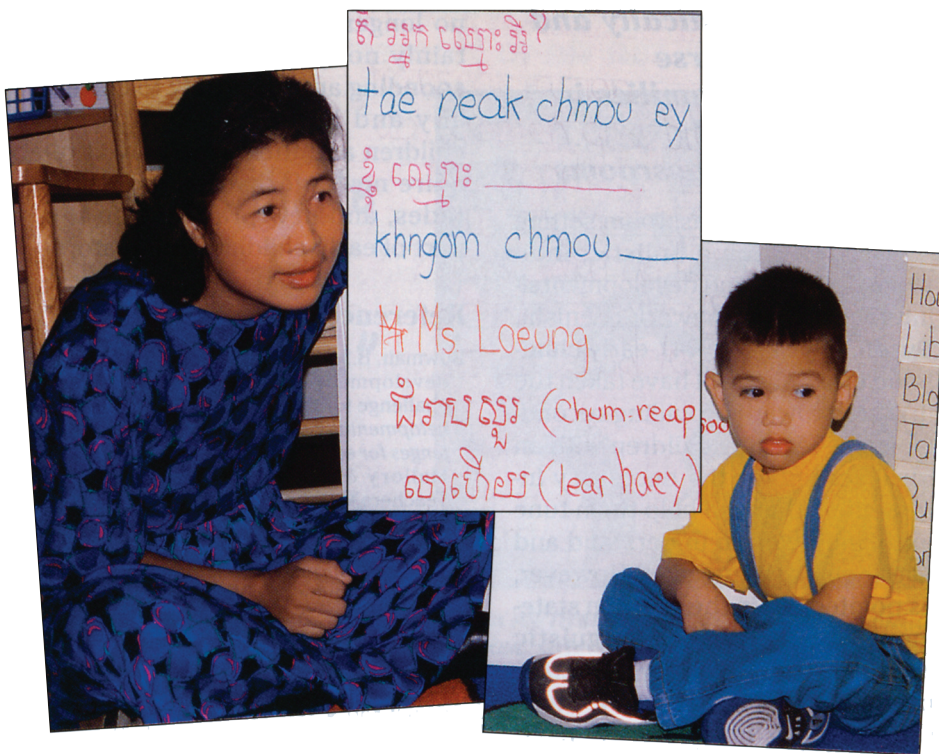
Outside time also has potential for helping second-language learners link up with English speakers, using partners in noncompetitive games (see Tabors 1997, Chapters 6 and 7, for more suggestions on how to facilitate second-language acquisition).

## Working with parents

Teachers will need to develop ways of communicating with the parents of second-language learners. Of course, the first step in this process is to find out about the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the families. A questionnaire for all parents concerning language and cultural practices, eating habits, child care arrangements, and parents' expectations about their child's experiences in the classroom can begin the process of gathering the necessary information. If the questionnaire is in English, some parents may need time to get help answering the questions. It is important to remember that their answers may not reflect their own facility in English (see Tabors 1997, Chapter 6, for a sample questionnaire).

The collected information can be used to help parents become true contributors to life in the classroom. A parent can be asked to share an activity that he enjoyed as a child or one that he enjoys doing with his own children. If parents of second-language learners are willing to use their home language during an activity, the English-language children can also learn what it feels like to be a second-language learner. Bringing home languages into the classroom will be highly affirming for the children who speak those languages.

Many parents from homes where English is not the primary language are very concerned about what language they should speak with their children. Educational research has found that children who maintain their home languages as they learn a second language do better in school later on (Collier 1987). But children will often make the decision to stop



using their home language once they are exposed to English. So it is important to work with parents on these issues and help them develop strategies for home-language maintenance. This is also an important part of building communication with the parents of second-language learners.

### Developing new methods of assessment

Developmentally appropriate assessment, in which systematic information is collected during typical classroom situations by the teacher who works most closely with a child, is a good place to start when thinking about the assessment of second-language learners (Bredenkamp & Rosegrant 1995). However, if the teacher and the child do not share a language, it will be necessary to expand the types of observations that a teacher is used to doing. One of the first questions a teacher should ask herself is, "Am I assessing the child's cognitive, emotional, and physical abilities, or her language abilities?"

To understand a child's cognitive, emotional, and physical abilities in language-free situations, or as demonstrated in the flow of classroom activities, will be an important part of the assessment process. Teachers will also need to know how a second-language learner is doing in first-language development—here a home visit may be crucial—and how he is doing in second-language acquisition (McLaughlin, Blanchard, & Osanai 1995, as discussed in Tabors 1997, Chapter 9).

### Developing new understandings about language and culture

All teachers bring belief systems into the classroom, often without knowing what those beliefs are. To develop effective ways of working with linguistically and culturally diverse children and families, teachers will need to examine those beliefs in relation to new information about bilingual/bicultural development. Teachers need to acquire information about the developmental sequence of

second-language learning and think about the cultural differences that will be significant to the child. As Bowman and Stott (1994, 131) have written, "Educating all children will require the will and commitment to understand and respond to cultural difference. To the extent that teachers know and understand how children's past experiences have been organized and explained, they are better able to fashion new ones for them."

### Serving linguistically and culturally diverse children and families in developmentally appropriate classrooms

By providing a classroom setting that is based on a holistic, individual-focused, and developmental-interactionist framework (Genishi, Dyson, & Fassler 1994), early childhood educators will have taken the first step toward providing second-language-learning children with an ideal setting for the necessary interactions that can help them tune in to and begin to understand and use their new language. However, as pointed out in the position statement "Responding to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity—Recommendations for Effective Early Childhood Education" (NAEYC 1996), there are more steps that need to be taken, particularly in the area of working closely with parents to support the home language and culture. The recommendations in the position statement add new dimensions to the definition of what an effective program is in light of the changing demographics of early childhood programs.

Clearly, this is an ongoing process that will continue over time as teachers gain experience and expertise. Business-as-usual in early childhood classrooms serving linguistically and culturally diverse children and families is no longer possible, and

it is certainly no longer preferable. Responding appropriately to culturally and linguistically diverse children and their families will require new information, new attitudes, and new practices on the part of early childhood educators.

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