



National Committee  
for Effective Literacy



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

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# INTRODUCTION

**The purpose of this paper is to inform early childhood practitioners, educational leaders, curriculum developers, and policymakers about literacy development and effective literacy instruction for young, developing bilingual children who are learning English as a new language<sup>1</sup> in early childhood classrooms.** These emergent bilingual children are often referred to as dual language learners (DLLs), the term used in this paper.<sup>2</sup> According to the Migration Policy Institute (2021), these approximately 7.4 million emerging bilingual children make up roughly 33% of all children under age six in the United States. Over 80% of dual language learners are children of color, and about 60% come from a home where Spanish is spoken. 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, stakeholders at every level will benefit from understanding the research base about DLL's linguistic and cultural assets *and* their unique linguistic and sociocultural needs. Pivotal to educators' effectiveness with young dual language learners is the accompanying professional learning in evidence-based instructional practices that best match those needs.

## A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

There are multiple terms used throughout the nation to refer to children who are developing two languages. Because the research base includes studies that refer to one or another of the terms, it is important to clarify them here.

**“Dual Language learners”** is the chosen term in the early childhood education world, used to refer to children birth to five who are learning two+ languages simultaneously or learning a second language while also still developing their home language.

**“English Learners”** (ELs) or English Language Learners (ELLs) is the term used in the K-12 public schooling system for students with a home language other than English and whose English is not yet proficient enough to comprehend, access and succeed in an English taught schooling system. It is based in civil rights law guaranteeing equal educational access and the right to services and supports to overcome the English language barrier.

In addition to these two terms, there are distinctions made based on the pathway to becoming bilingual, and the type of bilingualism. Bilingualism is typically defined in simple terms: the ability to communicate in two or more languages. The reality is that bilingualism is much more nuanced and complex, and there are a variety of contexts and profiles related to how individuals develop their languages, levels, and types of proficiency in each language.

**Simultaneous bilinguals** grow up using two languages from birth. By contrast, **sequential bilinguals** first develop their mother tongue and later learn a second language, usually at school.

**Circumstantial bilinguals** usually come from minoritized language groups that acquire their second language in order to participate in the majority community. Society tends to devalue their first language, resulting in a shift to monolingualism in the dominant language within one or two generations. On the other hand, **elective bilinguals** choose to become bilingual to enhance their social, economic or educational opportunities. They tend to become biliterate and are valued by society.

**Receptive bilinguals** can understand the less dominant language but do not speak, read or write it well or at all. This often happens with children and grandchildren of heritage language speakers. **Expressive bilinguals**, by contrast, can speak both languages but do not necessarily read or write both.

**Biliterates** can read and write both languages, and typically have formal academic language skills.

**Bilinguals** speak and understand but have not developed reading and writing skills in both languages.



## Literacy Development for Dual Language Learners

Current literacy development trends that claim to represent the “science of reading” (but actually focus on only a few narrow aspects of literacy) are a serious cause of concern among researchers, practitioners and teacher educators (Gonzalez & Miller, 2020). Rather than representing the full comprehensive set of literacy skills that the science of reading has identified, these efforts frame literacy development and literacy instruction from an English-centric standpoint that is based largely on the research with monolingual English speakers. It further narrows literacy development and literacy instruction to just English reading, frequently hyper-focusing on phonics instruction. This neither represents the actual science and research on reading, nor adequately speaks to literacy development for Dual Language Learners. This approach ignores the multilingual realities and literacy needs of English learners in K-12 settings and the early literacy needs of dual language learners in early childhood settings. The importance of culturally responsive pedagogy is also largely absent from the science of reading discussions. 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 is a misguided approach for all children, especially for dual language learners.

Direct narrow instruction of discrete literacy and math skills is already dominating kindergarten classrooms at the expense of meaningful and developmentally important play-based instruction (Bassok, Latham & Roren, 2016; Miller & Almon, 2009). With increasing calls to measure kindergarten readiness with English-only early literacy and math assessments (REL Northwest, 2016), there is danger that the current primary grades direct instruction approach will seep into the preschool context. This danger is particularly concerning given early childhood education’s critical role in building young children’s early language and literacy skills, including the multilingual and multiliteracy skills of dual language learners. When ECE supports cultural

connections and home language development, it positively impacts dual language learners’ later school success [National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017]. When these supports do not exist, dual language learners suffer home language loss, which not only denies them the cognitive and economic benefits of bilingualism but can have negative impacts on later literacy development, healthy identity development, and a stronger connection to family members (Anderson, 2012; Duran et al., 2013; Hammer et al., 2014; Wong-Fillmore, 1991; 2000).

Unfortunately, misconceptions about bilingualism and acquiring English as a new language abound. The most prevalent of these is that young children “pick up” a new language very quickly, that more English is better, and that bilingualism confuses children leading them to develop weak skills in both their languages (Soltero, 2011). Research findings over the past six decades refute these ‘myths’ by demonstrating the cognitive, academic, socio-emotional, and economic benefits of bilingualism and biliteracy and of developing children’s home languages as an effective bridge to the new language (Callahan & Gándara, 2014; Grosjean, 2021; Lindholm-Leary, 2016; Krizman, Shook, Skoe, & Kraus, 2012). Neuroscientists and psycholinguists point to the positive effects of learning two languages during the infant-toddler years and also to the human brain’s overall capacity to learn multiple languages. In addition, young children learning two languages have more neural activity in the parts of the brain associated with language processing than monolingual children (Bialystok, 2011; Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2012).

Becoming literate is a key goal of formal schooling not only because it is fundamental to further academic learning, but, more importantly, for the power literacy provides each of us to function in a literate society. Literacy positions learners both to be influenced by (through reading) and to be influencers for (through writing) individuals beyond their

immediate context. Dual language learners have the capacity to become good readers, writers, leaders, and informed citizens in two or more languages. However, they need effective, research-based, developmentally appropriate literacy instruction that is culturally and linguistically responsive to realize this potential. This paper was created to inform effective early literacy instruction for dual language learners and is organized in four sections:

## **SECTION 1**

### **Building Shared Understanding: Connections Between Language, Culture, and Literacy.**

Explains the nature of bilingualism and early literacy development for dual language learners, the harmful effects of language loss, and appropriate pathways for linguistic and culturally responsive literacy development.

## **SECTION 2**

### **The Dangers of a Narrowed Approach to Early Learning and Early Literacy.**

Explains the dangers of narrow approaches to dual language learners' early learning and early literacy, the impact of Kindergarten Readiness on policies and practices, and how an English-centric view of literacy for dual language learners does not serve their bilingual and English language development needs.

## **SECTION 3**

### **Research-Based Practices for Dual Language Learners' Literacy Development.**

Explains the importance of and connection between English language acquisition and the bilingual brain, and the inextricable link between language development and literacy development. It also describes the essential components of effective early literacy instruction for dual language learners, the conditions needed to facilitate their engagement and deep learning, and examples of what effective practices look like in bilingual classrooms in comparison to those primarily taught in English.

## **SECTION 4**

### **Conclusions and Recommendations.**

Provides a set of recommendations that can guide ECE teachers, literacy coaches, school leaders, district administrators, and policymakers in adopting best practices for dual language learners based on the growing body of research on bilingualism and early literacy development specifically for dual language learners.

Throughout this paper the authors reference the recent paper published by the National Committee for Effective Literacy, *Toward Comprehensive Effective Literacy Policy and Instruction for English Learner/ Emergent Bilingual Students* (Escamilla et al., 2022) to contextualize the larger debate over the “science of reading.”

## SECTION 1

### Building Shared Understanding: Connections Between Language, Culture, and Literacy

Regardless of socio-economic level, country of origin, or language(s) spoken in the home, all families bring assets that can be leveraged to support reading instruction. Funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) represent the wealth of knowledge and resources accumulated from life in the home that children possess when they arrive in ECE programs. These funds of knowledge are embodied in children's and families' languages and are represented through their beliefs, values, internalized rules, and expectations. Each child brings with them the accumulated and historically developed body of knowledge that is critical to their wellbeing and their cultural and linguistic identity.

Language is fundamental to how children develop relationships with others and how they understand their role in the home, community, and larger society. For dual language learners who are developing two (or more) languages, this plurality of languages provides a multi-textured way of viewing, understanding, and interacting in and with the world. Castro & Franco (2021) emphasize, "Bilingualism goes beyond being able to use two languages. It defines children's identity and the way they see and interpret the world around them" (p. 76). Literacy development is nested within this larger picture of first and second language acquisition and use. Children's oral language practice and development in both languages is foundational to their literacy development. Children build on their expanding oral language capacities through interactions with others in their homes, communities, and school.

Families engage in literacy practices in the home that are culture and language bound. Reading and writing activities undertaken in the course of daily events reflect the multifaceted identities of family members. They are influenced by heritage and community cultures and home-specific practices. Families incorporate activities such as oral storytelling, reading books, and creating or using other print materials (e.g., recipes, reminder notes, grocery lists, song lyrics, religious devotionals, social media, texts, emails, medical information, instructional manuals, and school communication). For dual language learners, this typically happens in their home language, and in some cases, simultaneously with English. When children arrive in ECE programs, they bring years of language-building experience, knowledge anchored in one or more languages, and early literacy practices that allow them to engage meaningfully with others in their home and community. These linguistic strengths, however, too frequently are not recognized in school contexts. Young learners can develop pre-literacy skills such as oral language, phonological and phonemic awareness, alphabet knowledge, and concepts about print by building on what they already know (Sousa, 2017). These skills are modeled and developed in homes through daily interactions with talk, music, and environmental print.

Early childhood education programs must not only be developmentally appropriate, but they should also take into account learners' bilingual and cultural ways of knowing. Through young children's daily interactions and experiences within their families and communities they organize concepts (schemas), enabling them to connect new information to their existing knowledge beginning at birth. Literacy instruction that is decontextualized and devoid of relevance to the learner's home language, literacy, and life denies the resources that each child brings with them to school. Worse still, literacy instruction that focuses primarily on developing discrete skills in English has the potential to erase much more than surface-level literacy practices of the home and community.

## The Harmful Consequences of Home Language Loss





Cultural assimilation and the dominance of English in the United States are strong forces that contribute to a language shift from the home language to English. Anderson (2012) notes that home language loss among Spanish speakers is influenced by many factors, including enrollment in English-only preschools, the perception and reality that Spanish is somehow a lower-status language than English, which results in limited opportunities in the schools, home, and communities to practice and develop Spanish.

When language shift and language loss occur, it is more than just the home language that is lost. Language loss also includes loss of culture and family bonds and has a long-term impact on a child's identity, socio-emotional wellbeing, and academic success. According to Genesee, Paradis, & Crago (2011), "Erasing a child's language or cultural patterns of language use is a great loss for the child. Children's identities and sense of self are inextricably linked to the language they speak and the cultures into which they have been socialized. Even at an early age, they are speakers of their languages and members of their cultures. Language and culture are essential to children's identities" (p. 33). These include their identities as literate learners. Therefore, literacy development must be informed by their home literacy practices and encompass the child's sociocultural, linguistic, cognitive, and academic dimensions. (Herrera et al., 2015).

Lily Wong Fillmore's (1991) seminal research with immigrant families documented the damaging disruption to family dynamics when children are denied culturally and linguistically responsive schooling. Instruction that furthers a monocultural and monolingual perspective on learning increases the potential of the child losing the home language and the advantages of bilingualism for education and beyond, including literacy (Escamilla et al., 2018; Montanari et al., 2016), cognition (Bialystock, 2001), high school persistence (Rumbaut, 2014), matriculation to four-year colleges (Santibañez & Zárate, 2014), and family cohesion (Portes & Hao, 2002).

## Examining the Messages of the School and Classroom

The NAEYC *Principles of Child Development and Learning* emphasize that early in life, children begin to recognize how they and others who share or do not share their identities are treated (Alanís & Iruka, 2021). Such developmental capacities provide an impetus for early childhood educators to reflect critically on the following questions:

-  *In what ways are school communications and interactions responsive to the multiliterate and multilingual community served?*
-  *How are all of the child's languages utilized as resources in the learning process?*
-  *In what ways are children supported to see learning as connected to their personal interests, motivations, literacies, and life experiences?*
-  *How are the perspectives of caregivers and family members used to support a strengths-based approach to learning and literacy?*

In culturally and linguistically affirming environments, young bilingual children use their individual ways of knowing, being, interacting, and comprehending to fuel their ongoing learning in and through their languages.

## SECTION 2

### The Dangers of a Narrowed Approach to Early Learning and Early Literacy

Instructional methods adopted by schools can be detrimental to all children when they subscribe to a narrowed, overly scripted curriculum focused on isolated, discrete skills. This approach is misaligned with how young children learn and is devoid of response to the cultural and linguistic realities of dual language learners. When these methods and associated assessments fail to consider the students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they can be particularly harmful to children of color and multilingual learners. Culture, like language, is a lens through which learning occurs. A culturally and linguistically “agnostic” pedagogical approach fails to acknowledge the dominant cultural and linguistic bias of the classroom. Such an approach places children of color and multilingual learners at a disadvantage. It contributes to the deficit-framing of their abilities and the achievement gaps that are explained away by this deficit-framing.

A related concern is the potential for an increased focus on teacher-directed learning and standardized learning assessments in early childhood education classrooms. These practices are already the norm in kindergarten. With the increased focus on kindergarten readiness, P-3 alignment, and a “reading crisis” in schools (Durán & Hikida, 2022), preschool programs may face a similar fate as today's kindergarten classrooms.

There is growing recognition of the importance of early learning in closing achievement gaps and setting children up for long-term success (Barnett & Frede, 2010; Gomez, 2016). For dual language learners specifically, participation in high-quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs/early childhood education can improve their academic achievement (Barnett et al., 2006; Espinosa & Magruder, 2015). In addition to focusing on early learning, there is increased attention to the preschool to third grade continuum. Many states are calling for and funding P-3 initiatives to strengthen the transition from preschool to kindergarten, and the alignment between the curriculum in early childhood education and early elementary school grades. While attention to curriculum alignment is welcome, there is a danger that the pedagogical strengths of preschool supporting children's healthy development and kindergarten readiness could be dismissed by trying to ensure that all children—especially those from low-income backgrounds—will meet narrowly defined, academically-specific kindergarten readiness benchmarks.

### Kindergarten Readiness

While there is no common definition of “kindergarten readiness” in the U.S., most states have filled this void with their own definitions of what this means. REL Northwest (2016) reported that 32 states either had a definition in place or were in the process of adopting one. Definitions and goals statements that focus broadly on important child development domains such as social and emotional development, cognitive development, and physical wellbeing, for the most part, tend to be written in developmentally appropriate ways. However, the concern is with those definitions that are overly academic and require children to demonstrate discrete skills in specific academic content areas. For example, Arizona's definition of kindergarten readiness expects children to demonstrate early language, literacy, mathematics, and science development. Louisiana goes further, expecting kindergarteners to show “cognitive abilities” in specific areas of early literacy (e.g., phonological awareness, print concepts, alphabetic understanding), basic numeracy (e.g., counting, number awareness, spatial awareness), basic science (e.g., using appropriate science vocabulary), and social studies



(e.g., an awareness of money and time). Even though a state may have adopted a more general definition of kindergarten readiness, students are often expected to demonstrate specific knowledge or skills when they transition to kindergarten. By 2018, 41 states had begun implementing a Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA), prompted in large part by the federal government's 2011 *Race to the Top: Early Learning Challenge* grant, which promoted the development and use of KEAs (Weisenfeld et al., 2020). More importantly, these 'readiness' expectations are typically English-centric with detrimental effects for dual language learners. Rather than describing what children will begin to learn about and experience as they enter kindergarten, these definitions consider "at-risk" any child that does not already demonstrate mastery of these academic skills before entering kindergarten.

Kindergarten readiness definitions and KEAs become harmful to children when they define and assess kindergarten readiness from an overly academic lens and when they contribute to kindergarten and preschool learning environments that are developmentally inappropriate for young children. Both child-initiated and teacher-guided play are essential to children's healthy development, and should be central elements of kindergarten classrooms and curricula. Unfortunately, play in kindergarten has increasingly been replaced by direct instruction in literacy and math and time spent preparing for standardized testing (Bassok, Latham & Roren, 2016; Miller & Almon, 2009). In many respects, kindergarten has become the new first grade, focusing more on academic content and standardized assessment and less on child-centered, imaginative exploration and educational play. It is important to reemphasize the danger of pushing developmentally inappropriate practices down into our preschool. An additional risk of kindergarten readiness definitions and KEAs to dual language learners is when they reinforce an English-centric view of literacy.

## An English-Centric View of Literacy

Besides an overemphasis on academic learning, directors of ECE programs should be wary of adopting views of literacy development and literacy practices that treat multilingual learners and monolingual English speakers the same. Dual language learners' biliteracy development is stunted, their cultural and familial bonds are weakened, and their long-term academic success can be undermined when literacy development becomes synonymous with English literacy that is itself based primarily or exclusively on research with monolingual English speakers. Too often, literacy instruction in U.S. schools is based on English literacy research and designed for monolingual English speakers. As such, it ignores the bilingual reality in which dual language learners live, how they learn, and how they acquire English as a new language. Current practices fail to address their bilingual brains, including the symbiotic relationships between dual language development, biliteracy development, and conceptual knowledge. "The degree to which the dual language brain is leveraged or ignored spells a major difference between effective and ineffective/exclusionary literacy instruction" for dual language learners (Escamilla et al., 2022, p. 7).

Effective literacy instruction and assessment for dual language learners should simultaneously address language development and pre-literacy skill development across their languages. To implement this type of bilingual instruction and assessment, early childhood educators need specialized training, expertise, and appropriate assessments to monitor dual language learners' biliteracy development and intervene appropriately when development in either language is not progressing as it should. They and their colleagues in the K-12 system also need adequate preparation to administer and interpret these kinds of assessments. Too often, the literacy assessments used in elementary schools, like literacy instruction, are based on English literacy development for English speakers. Thus, their use with dual language learners and English learners can lead to erroneous interpretations of their linguistic development, ineffective interventions, more English instruction, and less bilingual language instruction or support.

One particular area of concern related to the issue of assessment for dual language learners and young English learners in both preschool and K-12 settings is the increasing use of a universal dyslexia screener. At present, 38 states have adopted a dyslexia screener. Although not all states require these to be used with all children, the calls for more dyslexia screening and screening that begins in preschool are becoming more prominent (Rice & Gilson, 2022). Proponents highlight how early identification can lead to early intervention and prevent long term academic and social problems (Franchino, 2021; Sanfilippo et al., 2020). However, dyslexia screeners and interventions in the U.S. tend to be based on English literacy development and normed on monolingual English speakers (Caravolas, 2004; Sanfilippo et al., 2020). Furthermore, many education practitioners do not have the specialized knowledge required to administer and interpret assessment results for dual language learners and English learners. In general, education practitioners have had difficulty distinguishing between sociocultural/sociolinguistic factors (including language development) and disabilities, which has prompted calls for specific training in this area (Park et al., 2012). This training should include how to communicate with and collaborate with parents of linguistically diverse children about their children's early literacy development and the potential need for any screening, as well as how to communicate about the screening results. Unless educators receive this training, have access to appropriate screeners, deeply understand language and literacy development trajectories for dual language learners, know how to collaborate with parents of linguistically diverse children, and can respond with interventions that are appropriate for students who are learning English not just how to read in English, the use of universal dyslexia screeners with dual language learners may lead to inappropriate designation of risk.

Dual language learners and their K-12 English learners counterparts need effective and appropriate assessment and instruction. Lacking this, they risk becoming long-term English learners who suffer diminished opportunities to learn and fall so far behind their English-speaking peers that it is difficult for them to catch up and graduate high school (Callahan, 2013; Olsen, 2010). Literacy assessments that are based on bilingual children are desperately needed to promote effective literacy instruction for dual language learners and English learners. In addition, greater use of bilingual and biliteracy assessment approaches would go a long way in helping practitioners in ECE programs identify and support young dual language learners who may be experiencing challenges. However, assessments alone are insufficient. Educators at all system levels also need bilingual/biliteracy assessment training; and, most importantly, they need to use an assets-based instructional approach for multilingual children that builds on their linguistic and cultural resources. For decades, the early childhood education field has recognized the importance of affirming home language and culture, and, where possible, incorporating bilingual instruction. Early childhood educators should build on this assets-based approach and not abandon it for a narrowed, overly didactic, English-centric approach to literacy instruction that does not serve the needs of the growing dual language learner population.

## SECTION 3

### Research-Based Practices For Dual Language Learners' Literacy Development

Dual language reality must be understood and responded to in early literacy development, or language loss and language interruption occur. Literacy development may be delayed or even stunted. Head Start's Program Performance Standards explicitly acknowledge that supporting dual language learners' healthy development and their learning outcomes requires that "bilingualism and biliteracy [are recognized] as strengths and [that teachers] implement research-based practices that support their development" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Effective early language and literacy development approaches for young dual language learners must be built on a research base that combines all of the following:

- *Knowledge about early childhood development, including how young children learn and develop language overall.*
- *Understanding what constitutes developmentally appropriate early literacy instruction and the precursor skills to literacy.*
- *Specific knowledge about literacy and the bilingual brain, second language acquisition and multilingual learners.*

### Early Literacy Programs and Approaches for Dual Language Learners

Young children encounter text and messages about the purposes of text in their homes and community before they ever arrive in a classroom through signs in the community, cereal boxes on the table, and the literacy practices they observe at home, in church, among siblings, and so forth. Their more formal introduction and socialization to literacy as part of schooling occurs in the context of the curriculum, instruction, and learning environment of the ECE classroom. 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 two languages should be accommodated and developed.

Dual language learners in ECE programs are enrolled in one of three types of educational settings:

- *Bilingual Education including dual language education one-way or two-way programs.*
- *Programs in English with ESL and home language support.*
- *General education programs in English that have no specialized instruction (ESL) or other language supports (not considered a supportive or appropriate approach for dual language learners”).*

Dual language learners are developing language as an overall capacity, and are absorbing and internalizing the specific structures, rhythms, sounds, and vocabulary that comprise the language systems of two (or more) specific languages.

The programs that have the most long-lasting effectiveness for dual language learners are those that use the home language for instruction (bilingual and dual language education) or, at the very minimum, provide home language support and and ESL (English as a Second Language) instruction (Arias & Fee, 2018; Genesee, 2018; Lindholm-Leary, 2016; Mehisto & Genesee, 2015; Soltero, 2016; 2011).

## 1 Bilingual/Dual Language Education

Bilingual/Dual Language programs serve children who primarily speak the same home language and implement a bilingual education approach that focuses on language and early literacy development in both the home language and English. Bilingual/Dual Language programs include explicit language and literacy objectives in the student's home language and English as a new language. In addition, these programs include a clear and systematic allocation of instructional time for each language, as well as strategic alignment of early literacy curriculum and instruction in the two languages. ECE educators and support staff in effective Bilingual/Dual Language programs can provide high-quality interaction and instruction across all learning domains in both the home language and English.

Linguistically and culturally authentic instructional materials of high quality are available in both languages, and adequate time is devoted to each language to promote bilingualism and early biliteracy. While programs differ in the specific allocation of time for each language, research strongly points to having a minimum of 50% of the time in the home language (Barnett et al., 2007; Lindholm-Leary, 2014; 2016; Paez et al., 2007). Rich oral language is emphasized in both languages. Consistent research shows that teaching children early literacy in the home language (where they have the strongest linguistic and oral language base) supports their literacy development in English and confers cognitive, academic, and social benefits of bilingualism. Families are also encouraged to use the home language in home-based literacy activities and are supported in doing so. Books with and without audio are made available in the home languages. Especially these days, multiple strategies can be employed to read to children, talk about books, and dictate/write in their home language.

## 2 English Language Programs with Home Language Support and ESL

These are ECE programs where English is the medium of instruction, but this is supplemented with home language support and ESL instruction. This approach is advisable in cases where bilingual education teachers and staff are not available or where multiple languages are represented among the children in the classroom. English language development (also known as English as

a Second Language or ESL) instruction scaffolds the acquisition of English, supports dual language learners' comprehension and participation in the new language, and leverages and bolsters children's strengths in the home language as they engage in developing English. While interactions and instruction are primarily in English, effective practices in these settings include strong affirmation and intentionality regarding the promotion and utilization of the home language as well.

Similar to bilingual/dual language ECE programs, families with children in non-bilingual ECE programs are supported in their efforts to engage with their children in home literacy practices and are given similar instructional supports in the families' home languages to foster opportunities for children to be read to, talk about books, and dictate/write in their home language. In addition, parent and community volunteers and bilingual instructional assistants engage children in reading books and interactions in their home languages, including in rhymes, chants, and songs in their home languages to support their developing pre-literacy skills, such as phonological awareness.

It is important to note that general education programs in English with no specialized instruction or supports are not providing dual language learners what they need to succeed academically and develop a strong foundation in literacy and oral language. In order to begin to address the needs of dual language learners, general education programs can augment their practices in multiple ways. For example schools can provide home language support by hiring bilingual paraprofessionals, involving families in the classroom, creating "grow-your-own" programs, and partnering with community organizations. Schools and centers can also provide professional development in ESL and biliteracy instruction, partner with local colleges/universities, as well as offer tuition assistance for teachers to earn their ESL endorsements.

Articulating a specific planned dual language approach assures coherence and consistency in early literacy development for dual language learners. It ensures that ECE educators understand how to engage and leverage a child's dual languages most effectively. There are aspects of effective dual language learner early literacy instruction shared across these settings, as well as unique elements specific to each one.

## Effective Early Literacy Skills Development for Dual Language Learners

Regardless of which language program or approach is selected, effective early literacy skill development for dual language learners begins with recognizing that two languages are involved. Dual language learners leverage the knowledge and the linguistic resources they have been developing since birth in their home language when tackling the new task of acquiring early literacy skills, even when that exposure to literacy occurs in a new language (English). Whether in a Bilingual/Dual Language classroom or an English with home language support classroom, early literacy development occurs in the context of first and second (or subsequent) language development. Effective approaches recognize this fundamental reality and leverage the dual language development process as children are introduced to the skills and practices of literacy.

The brain processes and builds language systems in relation to each other. Developing both the home language and English simultaneously leads to strong cognitive, educational, and social benefits. Robust home language skills provide a foundation for, and frequently transfer to, developing English language skills. Rich language experiences in the home language are the bedrock for solid language competencies in a new language and serve as assets for supporting children along a pathway toward full bilingualism (and eventual biliteracy).

Research findings demonstrate that proficiency in a first language promotes literacy and school achievement in a second language (Cárdenas-Hagán & Carlson, 2007; Collier & Thomas, 2017; Lindholm-Leary, 2012). The effect is greatest when initial literacy exposure and instruction occur in the child's dominant language, where they have the strongest base of oral language and where text will have the strongest meaning. Children who are learning English as a new language are more likely to become readers and writers of English when they are already familiar with the vocabulary and concepts in their primary language. Effective literacy approaches ensure that

children maintain their home language while learning to speak and read English. Such approaches include non-English materials and resources in the classroom to support the home language of dual language learners while they also acquire oral proficiency and begin to engage with text in English.

Research shows that emergent literacy skills in the home language can help facilitate parallel skills in English referred to as cross-linguistic connections, transfer, or bridging (Lems et al., 2017). In addition, metalinguistic awareness, including the ability to recognize that other languages exist and have different characteristics, is important for reading development and is heightened in bilingual children (Bouchereau and Gort, 2012; Jarvis and Pavlenko, 2007). This finding is a key reason to foster literacy in both languages and to align even early literacy instruction across the languages. Understanding how the two languages of dual language learners “interact in cognitive processes, how bilingual brains function and benefit from handling two languages, the intersection of the two languages, and the use of cross-linguistic connections to expand children’s metabilingual awareness, provide the basis for formulating sound biliteracy practices” (Soltero, 2016, p. 89). The continued development of the child’s home language—with an explicit emphasis on the development of strong oral language—is a direct source of support for the child’s acquisition of English and successful reading in English later on. Attention to dual language development throughout literacy education is needed for all emerging bilingual students. For dual language learners in ECE classrooms, research suggests that a sound instructional approach to early literacy at a minimum includes the following five components:

### 1 Language-Rich and Print-Rich Learning Environments

A language-rich and print-rich environment is a resource and tool for all children but is particularly important for dual language learners developing literacy in English as a new language. Seeing print in their environment and providing children ample opportunities to connect that print to spoken language helps them develop print awareness and become familiar with the language and how it works. It serves



as a reference for comprehending text and underscores the many purposes of print. Teachers intentionally create such an environment through classroom libraries of books related to the topics children are learning. The teachers may label key items in the classroom (color-coded by language), create charts and print resources to capture what the class is learning, and engage children in drawing and dictating their stories and responses to their learning experiences. These “learning stories” become part of the classrooms’ student-created walls and learning library. Regularly referring to and using print in the environment is pivotal to internalized learning.

Children from preschools with extensive access to and interaction with print (e.g., through adult read-alouds and class libraries) prior to the start of formal schooling have a head start in literacy socialization compared to children with less opportunity to interact with print during their early years. Print immersion is one of the aspects of early childhood education with the greatest effect size in supporting later literacy skills. (Hiebert & Martin, 2010; Lindsay, J. 2010; Wylie, Hodgen et.al., 2006). Moreover, the causal relationship between early print access, literacy engagement, and literacy achievement holds for both native and non-native speakers of the school language.

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

Another critical component of effective literacy instruction for dual language learners is active exposure, to and positive engagement with extended text, including books in the student’s home language as well as 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 purposes and books as beneficial or enjoyable. The degree of positive immersion and experience with print in the early years is highly correlated with later success as readers. For dual language learners, effective reading approaches involve surrounding children with access to interesting, relevant, and culturally inclusive books in both of their

languages. The idea is to engage them with interactive and dialogic read-alouds, and shape inquiry projects in which the children want to turn to books for information. This is how they become increasingly socialized to literacy, come to know the purposes and gifts of reading, and understand that literacy has applications in and across their linguistic and cultural worlds. Concepts of print are established through frequent engagement with books. For dual language learners, this means creating a print immersive and engaging environment using books 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. Dual language learners with solid oral language skills and vocabulary in their home language are positioned to engage in the mechanics of reading, and can recognize the sounds, words, and structures of other languages to grasp the meaning of what they see and hear. For dual language learners who are developing early literacy in English, the development of oral language and background knowledge *in English* is crucial to effective early literacy approaches, helping to connect the association of sounds and text with meaning. The repertoire of vocabulary that dual language learners develop as preschoolers is an important precursor to their development of reading skills and comprehension. Therefore, the books selected to read to children should present expressive language, precise word usage, and a range of language syntaxes. As children develop vocabulary in their home language and English, they will benefit by exposure to the relationship between the vocabulary

of the two languages, including common roots and cognates. Attentiveness to the sound and structures of language supports learners' engagement in literacy in multiple languages.

#### **4 Phonological Awareness in and Through Both Languages**

Phonological awareness, the ability to hear the language sounds, is a precursor to word reading ability. Chanting, singing, rhyming, and attending to the sounds that comprise words are effective ways to support children in homing in on the sounds of language, which prepares them to approach the task of decoding words. During the emergent literacy phase as children develop their oral language and their early phonological awareness, dual language learners acquire an increasingly sophisticated comparative understanding of each of their languages. It is important to offer consistent opportunities to hear and engage in each language separately and authentically. As children are introduced to the alphabet and exposed to text, the phonological distinctions between the sounds of their two languages become an essential element in preparing for later attention to and instruction in foundational phonics skills and decoding in two languages.

#### **5 Building Cross-Linguistic Connections and Metalinguistic Awareness**

As dual language learners engage in early literacy, they do so through both (or all) their languages. They are developing bilingual identities (“I have two languages!”) and comparing and contrasting their languages as they incorporate more sophisticated language systems into each language (“It works this way in Spanish, and that way in English.”) Some aspects of literacy are the same across their languages, and some function differently. Naming these differences, and helping children understand (and celebrate) that they are developing two language systems with some similarities and some differences, is the beginning of cross-language metalinguistic awareness, an essential early literacy skill for dual language learners. 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 (the same letters may have different sounds in different languages), or early decoding, the more teachers understand the comparative features of the languages spoken by learners—and the more they utilize strategies for building cross-language connections, supporting transfer and engaging translanguaging—the more effective literacy education will be for dual language learners.

Other necessary early literacy skills, such as memory, visual recall, and writing, are developed most effectively with attention to the dual language brain and the bicultural realities of dual language learners. ECE teachers are encouraged to leverage, to the degree possible, the stronger comprehension and oral language base a learner has in the home language to introduce new literacy skills. For example, educators can initiate early literacy activities such as narrative retelling or dictating a story by first engaging children in skill-building utilizing their home language.

## Important Conditions for Literacy Development

In addition to the five components of early literacy instruction described above, important contextual features are found to contribute to the effective development of literacy for dual language learners. These research-based conditions facilitate dual language learners' motivation and engagement with books and enhance their development of early literacy skills.

### 1 Literacy Development Integrated with Content Learning

Thematic units built around relevant and exciting science and social studies topics and themes are an excellent way to provide the content context for early literacy development. In such contexts, literacy has a purpose, and oral language, vocabulary, and background knowledge serve as building blocks for literacy and give meaning to the words and sentences children encounter in books. They engage with print as they learn about and explore the world with tangible, hands-on learning experiences that give meaning to language and provide a purpose for text.

### 2 High-Quality Relevant and Culturally Inclusive/Responsive Texts and Materials

Materials selected should affirm children's identities and heritage and help them develop a positive self-image as they make connections to the text. The comprehensiveness and inclusiveness of books and materials in the classroom—especially those used in literacy instruction—influence the effectiveness of early literacy instruction. For dual language learners, this includes linguistic, cultural, racial/ethnic, and national identities and perspectives. High-quality materials also comprise books with expressive, beautiful, and complex language, avoiding the simplified and impoverished written materials frequently provided to young emergent bilinguals and relying instead on teachers' instructional strategies to scaffold engagement with rich text.

### 3 An Affirming and Inclusive Climate of Support for Home Language, Culture, and Bilingualism

While attention to both of a child's languages is vital to how literacy instruction is approached, the overall affective climate and messaging about the value of the home language and culture are crucial to the motivation and academic to dual language learners' success. Young children absorb attitudes about the status and value of languages and cultures and quickly determine whether their family, culture, and language have a place and are respected in the school. An unwelcoming or, worse yet, hostile environment that devalues cultural and linguistic diversity influences the degree to which dual language learners view literacy as relevant to them. A disaffirming environment is a significant factor in language loss and rejection, which have an impact on both language development and school participation. An affirming climate and respect for a child's home language and culture is a condition for active participation, engagement, and effective learning. Programs in which dual language learners develop strong early literacy skills provide messaging that affirms the value of bilingualism and biliteracy. These types of settings welcome and embrace families and communities, and utilize literacy practices that foster home-community-school connections.

Below is a brief comparison of how teachers support early literacy development in the Bilingual/Dual Language classroom vs. the English general education classroom and offers some ideas on how to optimize dual language learners' school experience.

### HOW IT LOOKS IN BILINGUAL/DUAL LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

- Focus on expanding children's bilingual/biliteracy development.
- Emphasize oral language and vocabulary in both the home language and English.
- Literacy and oral language development occurs within the context of learning about the world – the focus on literacy is integrated with content.
- Children are immersed in the home language a minimum of 50% of the time engaged.
- Teachers/adults act as language models using the home language authentically.
- Use predictable/pattern language books to connect to discrete skills in the home language.
- Use linguistically/culturally authentic books in both languages, and engage bilingual children with cross-linguistic connections (similarities/difference between their home language and English).
- Incorporate children's home language varieties, English varieties in the U.S., and translanguaging.
- Include daily ESL time that is meaning-oriented and integrates content (songs, rhymes, stories, fingerplays, retelling, games, etc.).
- Use language development benchmarks and ESL state standards that are appropriate for young dual language learners.
- Incorporate families' funds of knowledge, invite them to share their linguistic, culturally, and lived experiences and knowledge.

### HOW IT LOOKS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

- Focus on oral language development.
- Literacy and oral language development occurs within the context of learning about the world – the focus on literacy is integrated with content.
- Differentiate the instruction and assessments for dual language learners from that of native English speakers.
- Use predictable/pattern language books to teach discrete skills.
- Use linguistically/culturally authentic.
- Ask children to connect to and think about how things are said in their home language.
- Always accept the language in which children speak and express themselves.
- Learn key phrases and vocabulary in children's home language and use them in instruction and informal conversations with children.
- Use specialized language (ESL) strategies integrates content (songs, rhymes, stories, fingerplays, retelling, games, etc.).
- Use language development benchmarks and ESL state standards that are appropriate for young dual language learners.
- Incorporate families' funds of knowledge, invite them to share their linguistic, culturally, and lived experiences and knowledge.

## Toward a Comprehensive and Effective Early Literacy Approach for Dual Language Learners

This research-based description of effective early literacy instruction and how literacy develops for dual language learners differ greatly from prevalent current tendencies to double-down on foundational skills instruction in the preschool years. It's a mistaken belief to assume that the sooner discrete reading skills instruction begins, the better. The research on young children points instead to a very different orientation that utilizes the preschool years to build language in the context of learning and play. Here, socializing children into literacy practices and focusing on precursor skills will build a solid foundation for their later success as readers and writers.

For young children whose home languages are other than English, the research points to the need for explicit attention to the fact that the development of literacy is fundamentally influenced by the reality of having two (or more) languages and is, therefore, different from literacy development of 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. It includes attention to literacy socialization and active engagement with books in both languages, creating a language-rich and print-rich classroom environment, building oral language and wide vocabulary in both languages, building phonological awareness in and through both languages, attending to cross-language connections, memory, and visual recall, and emergent skills in writing. All of this is enhanced and made more effective in contexts where literacy development is integrated with content learning, high-quality culturally inclusive/ responsive materials are used, and an overall assets-oriented, affirming, and inclusive climate is present.

School/district leaders, program directors, ECE teachers, and policymakers all share responsibility for avoiding the adoption of early literacy curriculum, instruction, and models that fail to embrace the research findings on comprehensive, linguistically, and culturally responsive early literacy that works for dual language learners.



# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this paper, we provide research-based arguments to counter the current English-centric science of reading approaches that are particularly ill-advised for dual language learners. In their place, we delineate a comprehensive research-based approach to early literacy instruction for dual language learners that is linguistically and culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate. Of critical importance for the early childhood education field is to move away from “simplistic, out-of-date, and inappropriate responses and to instead build national and state efforts around literacy to attend to what we know works for ELs/EBs [English learners/emergent bilinguals],” (Escamilla et al., 2022, p. 13). As Escamilla and colleagues (2022) assert, “We cannot prescribe a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching reading when the children who enroll in our schools represent such diversity.”

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 in bilingual education points to critical characteristics of quality early childhood programs for dual language learners that include their home language and culture, fully engage their families as educational partners, and implement linguistically and culturally responsive approaches.

As ECE educators contend with knowing how to navigate conflicting messages regarding literacy instruction, we must look to credible sources in the field to guide our decision-making, including the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) statement *On Responding to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity*:

*“[NAEYC’s] recommendations emphasize that early childhood programs are responsible for creating a welcoming environment that respects diversity, supports children’s ties to their families and community, and promotes both second language acquisition and preservation of children’s home languages and cultural identities.”*

<https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/diversity.pdf>

Linguistic and cultural diversity is an asset, not a deficit, for young children. We offer the following recommendations for early childhood educators, school/district leaders, researchers, and policymakers in adopting best practices for dual language learner education. The recommendations are based on research related to bilingualism and early literacy development for dual language learners.

**Research in bilingual education points to critical characteristics of quality early childhood programs for dual language learners that include their home language and culture, fully engage their families as educational partners, and implement linguistically and culturally responsive approaches.**

# Critical Recommendations for Dual Language Learner Education

- *Early Childhood Teacher and Leadership Preparation and Professional Development*
- *Instructional Approaches, Materials and Curriculum*
- *Linguistically and Culturally Appropriate Assessments*
- *Policy*
- *Research*

## Early Childhood Teacher and Leadership Preparation and Professional Development

1. Include required coursework in the acquisition and assessment of English as a new language, biliteracy methods, and ESL in early childhood education and leadership licensure programs.
2. Provide scholarship/tuition incentives for early childhood teachers and leaders to earn their bilingual education and/or ESL endorsements.
3. Integrate required teacher and leader professional development on the theory, research, and pedagogy of dual language learner education, including second language literacy, biliteracy, and linguistically and culturally responsive education.
4. Allocate funds for educators and leaders to attend conferences or professional learning seminars that focus on research-based practices for dual language learners.
5. Ensure that all early childhood educators—not just bilingual and ESL teachers—participate in extended professional development on dual language learner education.

## Instructional Approaches, Materials, and Curriculum

1. Adopt a comprehensive early literacy approach for dual language learners that is grounded in research and theory in second language acquisition and biliteracy. At a minimum, this approach should include:
  - a. Active, positive engagement with text in the home language and English;
  - b. A language-rich, print-rich environment;
  - c. Rich oral language and wide vocabulary development in both languages;
  - d. Phonological awareness in and through both languages;
  - e. Building cross-language connections and metalinguistic awareness.
2. Ensure early childhood pre-literacy practices are developmentally appropriate and focused on the precursors to literacy, not on explicit and discrete “reading skills.”
3. Follow a curriculum and implement literacy instruction that is culturally and linguistically responsive and developmentally appropriate.
4. 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.
5. Ensure plentiful access to and daily engagement with books and print in both home language and English.
6. Differentiate instruction based on children’s English proficiency levels and include specific English language learning objectives connected to English Language Development (also called English as a Second Language) state standards.
7. Value families’ varied home literacy practices, including oral literacies, as culturally and linguistically bound assets to be tapped and integrated into classroom instruction.

## Linguistically and Culturally Appropriate Assessments

1. When possible, use assessments in the child's home language, including norm-referenced and authentic/performance-based tools.
2. Ensure assessments that are used with dual language learners have been normed on this population. If these assessments were not specifically designed for dual language learners, be sure to follow the suggested guidance about how to interpret the results for dual language learners.
3. Ideally, no assessments that were designed for and normed exclusively on monolingual English speakers should be used with dual language learners. If such assessments are used with this population, their results should be interpreted with extreme caution and they should never be used in isolation. Their results should be interpreted alongside the results of other measures that have been normed on and are appropriate for dual language learners.
4. Reevaluate inappropriate school readiness indicators that drive expectations and curriculum, prioritize academic readiness over developmental benchmarks, and are based on an English-centric orientation.

## Policy

1. For dual language learners, base policy decisions on the research related to bilingualism and early literacy development for dual language. Be wary of policy proposals (even those that may claim to represent the “science of reading”) that are primarily based on monolingual English speakers and does not address second language acquisition and its connection to English literacy development, much less biliteracy development. Moreover, an overemphasis and unnecessarily didactic approach to discrete reading skills is not developmentally appropriate for early learning.
2. 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 dual language learners. Ensure their expertise informs decisions that affect access to linguistically and culturally responsive education for dual language learners.

3. Increase the bilingual ECE teacher pipeline and partner with universities to provide bilingual education and ELD/ESL endorsements.
4. Expand state legislated requirements to provide specialized services (e.g., bilingual education, ELD/ESL education) for dual language learners in preschool and Head Start (see Illinois School Code Article 14c that encompasses PK-12).
5. Consider the impact of policies on both children's emotional wellbeing and the bonds between them and their families.
6. Promote policies that support multilingualism for all children.

## Research

1. Broadly disseminate seminal and current research on early childhood bilingualism and second language acquisition, early biliteracy development, and linguistically and culturally responsive education.
2. Expand research on the benefits of maintaining/developing children's first language and culture as an integral part of their long-term academic success.
3. 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. Although these children and their families are disproportionately more likely to face significant challenges than non-dual language learners—including experiencing poverty, limited access to health services, and food insecurity—these children, like all children, have enormous potential that can be fully realized if they are given the right opportunities. A high-quality education beginning in early childhood is one of these opportunities. For dual language learners, this includes an early education classroom that uses a comprehensive early literacy approach that is developmentally appropriate and embraces children's linguistic and cultural assets.

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## ENDNOTES

1 There are many terms used to describe instructional strategies/methods used to teach students who are learning English in schools as a new language. Other terms include English Language Development (ELD), English as a Second Language (ESL), and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). In this paper, English as a new language is used most often since some monolingual English speakers are also developing their English in schools and some dual language learners are not learning English as a second (but maybe as a third or even fourth) language. However, ELD/ESL is still used in the paper to refer to ELD/ESL instructional strategies and standards.

2 Several terms are used by education agencies and districts to refer to students not yet proficient in English who are developing it as a second language. The most common include English language learners (ELLs), English learners (ELs), and emergent bilinguals (EBs). In the early childhood education sphere, the term used is dual language learners (DLLs). See "A note on terminology," p. 4, in Escamilla et al., 2022, for more information about these terms.



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