



## One Language, Two Languages, Three Languages . . . More?

It is about time to go home for the day, and 2-year-old Lupe is happily playing with a book, pretending to read it to another child. Lupe notices her teacher Silvia and walks over to show her the book. Silvia, who is bilingual, asks her, “¿Quieres que te lea el libro?” [Do you want me to read you the book?]. Lupe nods. Silvia reads in Spanish to Lupe and the other child, pointing out the illustrations and using a warm and caring voice. The children look up at her and smile. They are both enjoying a good time with Silvia, pointing to the objects in the book and saying the words in Spanish.

Lupe’s mom Adela, a native Spanish speaker, arrives to pick up her daughter. She appears surprised by what she sees and hears. Adela asks Silvia, “Why are you speaking to her in Spanish? Lupe needs to learn English!”

**THIS SCENARIO DEMONSTRATES** the myth that non-English speakers must learn English early and rapidly. Adela worries that Lupe will not learn English successfully if she continues to hear Spanish, but research on dual language acquisition (DLA) shows that Adela’s assumption that children can learn only one language at a time is inaccurate. The fact is, given the opportunity, very young children can and will learn two or more languages at the same time (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago 2004).

Some children, from birth until they enter preschool, hear only the lan-

guage spoken at home by their parents and relatives. Others, like Lupe, who entered a child care program at 3 months of age, also hear the language that the majority of people outside the home speak. It is important that early childhood teachers help families understand that children can learn two languages at the same time. They should reassure parents that learning two languages doesn’t come at the expense of either language.

A child who can communicate and socialize with his parents, grandparents, and extended family will maintain the connection to his cultural identity and acquire a sense of belonging (NAEYC 1995). In addition, cognitive skills such as thinking, reasoning, problem solving, and word choice, which the child uses in learning his home language, are the same skills needed to learn English, thus paving the way for later school success.

Infants and toddlers have the ability to learn more than one language at the same time and can do so well (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago 2004). The belief that a child has to abandon his

home language to be able to learn English implies that the young brain has limited learning capacity. In fact, there is no need to “make space” for language in a young child’s brain, because the brain is wired to learn language. This concept is at the core of the most effective advice educators can give families: Make every effort to help children learn and keep their home language. What matters most is that the infant/toddler is exposed to an effective language-learning environment, whether it is in a supportive care setting or at home (Powers 2008)

### Learning environments

An effective learning environment for the young dual language learner is one in which strategies are in place *intentionally* and *continuously* to support bilingualism. Such practice validates children’s home language. It also helps them develop a sense of self.

In high-quality infant/toddler programs, the teachers

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Illustration by Melanie Hope Greenberg.

- engage young children in conversation during daily routines, for example, during mealtime or before nap time;
- read with children, using common words, poems, songs, and stories in children's home languages;
- label objects verbally;
- introduce the sounds of the alphabet letters to the dual language learner in the home language in addition to English; and
- invite families and members of the child's cultural community to share stories, songs, and food.

In the home, parents and other adults

- talk with the child in their home language;
- read books in their home language or tell their own stories to their children; and
- encourage children to use their home language to talk and socialize with them and with the extended family.

Whether in the classroom or at home, the most effective strategy for early language learning is frequent exposure to and repetition in the language that the adults are most comfortable speaking.

#### THINK FIRST

- Consider what may be your own cultural biases about exposing infants and toddlers to more than one language. Assess your assumptions on these issues.
- Think about how you can explore with families their beliefs about dual language acquisition. What language do the parents or the extended family use to talk to the child? Do you feel comfortable asking the family for that information?
- Keep up-to-date on what research says about exposing a child to two languages in infancy and how successful young children are at learning two or more languages at the same time. One of the many benefits is that through interactions and experiences in two languages, young children acquire literacy skills way before they enter school, before formal reading and writing instruction begins. Think about ways to share this information with families.

#### NOW TRY IT

- Demonstrate respect for families' values and beliefs by responding to their preferences for language use in the infant/toddler classroom.
- Learn about the cognitive, social, and economic benefits of bilingualism, and share your knowledge with families.
- Share with parents strategies that can enrich the home language environment.
- Provide children's books and materials, such as CDs, musical toys, blocks, and puppets, that families can use at home.
- Invite families to share with the class some of the music, stories, and songs from their native background.
- Use interpreters, if possible and when necessary, to communicate with families in their own language. Whenever possible, handouts with information about their child or announcements should be translated into a family's home language.
- Encourage parents to visit the classroom. Create activities such as house-keeping play that they can engage in with their child at school and at home.

#### References

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#### Resources for learning more about bilingual children

- C. Baker. 2000. *A parents' and teachers' guide to bilingualism*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
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