Early Education: Dual Language Learners

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Executive Summary

The United States is increasingly becoming a linguistically diverse nation, which makes the topic of language acquisition relevant given the English-dominance of school classrooms. While English as a Second Language (ESL) classes are prevalent in K-12 education, little has been regulated for early education. These preschoolers, known as Dual Language Learners (DLLs) because of their typically simultaneous development of English and their home language, are often at risk for later deficiencies in classroom performance as they enter school and can fall behind their monolingual peers. Research into DLLs indicates that they might suffer from asynchronous development of language due to learning two languages at once.

The literature on DLLs in early education settings suggests that several best practices in the classroom can help facilitate greater learning, benefitting both English proficiency and enhancing some skills in the student's home language. The interventions studied included engaging in early literacy practices, monitoring specific language use, and teaching the same material in both languages.

The state of Missouri does implement some policies to support DLLs and their families, including testing students in their own language and working with community partners that support Limited English Proficiency (LEP) families. Policies and regulations that could be implemented, but are currently not offered include offering enrollment information in a large variety of languages, providing DLL-specific training for teachers, and having bilingual requirements for outreach workers.

Following an analysis and synthesis using the information found on DLLs in early education, a series of recommendations and best practices emerged. Recommendations for the state of Missouri include assessing English Language Learners before kindergarten entry, establishing a QRIS system, and adapting ESL standards for the early education classroom. While less specific, recommendations for the classroom include offering increased training and professional development, if possible, as well as working to incorporate student home languages into the classroom, if appropriate.

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Introduction

With the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity of the United States, many preschool age children are coming into classrooms from homes where a language other than English is primarily spoken. Students entering with limited English proficiency who speak another language at home are known as Dual Language Learners (DLLs). DLLs are at risk for poorer school performance in later grades and are more likely to fall behind their monolingual peers. Additionally, due to issues of assessment, DLL students are at risk for being over-diagnosed with impairments.[1] In order to foster early literacy and language skill development, early education teachers can take on a variety of practices focusing on both monolingual students and DLLs. Research indicates that ongoing training for teachers in helping to cultivate both the home language and English can help increase overall early literacy skills for DLLs. Evidence from several studies and research from both governmental agencies and focused nonprofit organizations have researched best practices for supporting DLLs in early education. These best practices range from encouraging sociodramatic play to offering vocabulary words in both English and the DLL's home language. Additionally, Missouri's current supports were examined and recommendations for further support for DLLs in early education classrooms were offered.

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Dual Language Learners

Dual Language Learners, which for the purposes of this brief will be defined as children under five who are undergoing language development in both English and another language, are part of an increasing group of U.S. residents. The federal definition of an English learner, as stated in Title IX of the Education Amendment of 1972, outlines that an English learner has the following traits:[2]

- Age 3-21
- Enrolled or preparing to enroll in an elementary or secondary school
- Someone who was not born in the United States or whose native language is a non-English language, who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual's level of English language proficiency, who is migratory with a native and culturally dominant language other than English
- Someone whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual the ability to meet the state's proficient level of achievement of the state assessment, the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English, or the opportunity to participate fully in society

Students in Missouri are not assessed as English Language Learners (ELLs) until they enter kindergarten, an action that could increase gaps between English Language Learners and their monolingual classmates. Preschoolers whose home language is a language other than English are known as Dual Language Learners because their language development in their home language (L1) and English (L2) are happening at the same time as they have not yet developed full literacy skills in either language. However, the research indicates that dual language development in the early years

is not a cognitive or linguistic burden, as is sometimes assumed.[3] Further, development and support for ELL students can be effective before kindergarten, with development of English language skills in preschool shown to be especially helpful for students with a home language other than English. Preschool-DLLs often show profile effects, meaning that some of their language development subskills approach the level of their monolingual peers, but not all.[4] Additionally, vocabulary and literacy development might be different across both languages as they might have knowledge in L1 that they might not be able to express in L2 or vice versa. Thus, this contributes to the asynchronous skill development that might occur amongst DLLs as they are learning two languages at once.

Effective Practices For Supporting Pre-K Dual Language Learners

As the population of the United States becomes more linguistically diverse than ever before, researchers are increasingly focused on ways of supporting DLLs early in their education careers. Enhancing early literacy skills for both bilingual and monolingual students can help close achievement gaps later in subjects such as reading and math. However, research indicates that even when DLLs in English immersion classrooms make significant gains in English learning, they are still behind their monolingual classmates. Additionally, the English gains made in a bilingual English-Spanish pre-K class were similar to those made in English immersion classrooms, pointing to a need to go beyond the scope of classroom style to best assess DLL language development.[5] However, some teacher observations show that teachers, even those that speak the student home language, use few linguistically responsive approaches in the preschool classroom.[6] Research done in the field points to potential strategies for pre-K teachers, especially if enhanced through professional development and training, that can help boost students' readiness for kindergarten as well as areas in the field where improvements can be made.

An intervention in the Baltimore Head Start system examined how the quality of language used by Head Start teachers can foster vocabulary, early literacy, and early math skills for low-income students.[7] The intervention involved using a preschool sequence that included language and literacy development, knowledge acquisition and cognitive development, and physical well-being and motor development. Head Start teachers received information about the sequence in addition to ongoing literacy development training. After testing children in areas of vocabulary development, it was found that while teacher language use did predict gains in vocabulary for ELLs, it did not for native English speakers, indicating that they are not promoting more advanced English skills. The increased vocabulary development narrowed but did not close the gap between ELLs and native English-speaking preschoolers. This study highlights the possible positive effects of on-going training for preschool teachers as it could help increase gains in vocabulary development. In the study, most of the teachers' skills fall into the mid-range, so there is room for growth through professional development.

Other studies, which will be further addressed below, looked at more specific practices, such as teaching with the same storybooks in multiple languages and utilizing socio-dramatic play in preschool classrooms. One study looked at the effectiveness of a cross-linguistic storybook intervention in which a shared reading experience between parents and children took place in a home setting.[8] The students, age four, in a Head Start program, would read a storybook in English in the class setting and then read the same book in their second language at home. Analyzing pre and post intervention data indicated a change in second language acquisition skills and emergent literacy skills. However, the study included a very small number of participants, making it difficult to generalize these results to a greater population of DLLs.

Another practice studied, as it relates to DLLs, is the use of socio-dramatic play in the early education classroom. Socio-dramatic play involves sharing imaginative play with other children and is a fluid, changing form of interaction.[9] It boosts early literacy skills as well as prompts children to use language to communicate the context of the play and interact socially during play.[10] There are a number of evidence-based strategies available for English language learners to utilize during play times in preschool which build early literacy skills. These practices include providing reading and writing focused centers by providing paper for writing, allowing kids to listen to audiobooks, and adding books to other stations; bringing in cultural aspects to centers; constructing a picture dictionary for the kids by putting the word in both languages and having them illustrate it.

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In terms of strategies and practices for supporting DLLs in the classroom, resources from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Head Start recommend following the Planned Language Approach (PLA).[11] This has five pieces to it. The first piece involves programs having clear systems in place to support high quality instruction including methods of program assessment. The next piece involves providing home language support to DLLs while facilitating English learning so that the student can progress in both languages. In this vein, research indicates that students who are given instruction in their home language acquire academic skills in pre-K, especially when receiving high quality instruction.[12] The approach also involves utilizing research-based literacy practices that specifically work for culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. Another key piece of the PLA is that instructors need to hone strategies for when they do not speak the DLL's language. Strategies for this practice are outlined below. The last key piece of the PLA involves employing experiences in the Big 5, which includes: background knowledge, oral language and vocabulary, book knowledge and print concepts, alphabet knowledge and early writing, and phonological awareness. Honing these five skills can better develop early language and literacy skills for children, especially in supporting DLLs.

Several national education organizations also publish lists of recommendations for best classroom practices to boost ELL standards and to encourage increased English skills. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) published a list of recommendations for ways monolingual teachers can support young DLLs.[13] First, NAEYC recommends connecting with families early, including learning more about home language practices and the child's interests. Second, they recommend fostering a nurturing and supportive physical environment for the learner, including a print-rich environment that represents all home languages in available reading material and signage. Last, they recommend creating intentional instructional support for DLLs which might involve written messages with daily vocabulary and then using that message to reinforce learning as well as using anchor text and mixing words and text to imprint meaning on the student. Other instructional methods in this vein might include pairing movements with vocabulary, using songs/chants, and center activities for individuals and small groups to facilitate peer interactions.

Missouri and Pre-K Dual Language Learners

While the offering of English as a Second Language (ESL) classes to children in grades K-12 is a federally mandated and required process under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), there is no specific mandate on how English Language Learners (ELLs) should be treated in early education classrooms.[14, 15] Some states, such as Missouri, have left the allowances and accommodations that are made for pre-K ELLs under the local control of the individual school districts and do not regulate services for pre-K dual language learners (DLLs). Districts are not required to identify ELLs until kindergarten.[16] Additionally, who qualifies as a DLL is locally determined.[17] In addition to no laws regulating bilingual education, Missouri also offers no QRIS quality ratings for pre-K programs and does not distribute a kindergarten readiness assessment for monolingual and bilingual students alike.[18] As it follows, Missouri has only a small number of state-wide policies that apply to DLLs at the pre-K level. The policies that Missouri does have are as follows:

- DLLs are assessed in their home language[19, 20]
- Early learning and development standards have content related to serving DLLs or cultural awareness[21]
- Enrollment of DLLs in the state pre-K program is recorded[22]
- Information materials are offered in non-English languages[23]
- Bilingual caseworkers or translators are available if needed

While Missouri does offer a few accommodations for DLLs and their families, there are numerous potential areas of support in which they lack policies and regulations. Those areas are as follows:[24, 25]

- The state does not offer LEP families applications or the website in non-English languages
- Lead agencies do not accept applications at community-based locations
- Partnerships with community-based organizations for limited English proficiency (LEP) families are not offered (previously employed, but not included in the 2019-2021 Child Care Development Fund Plan)[26]
- No bilingual requirements for outreach workers
- No training and technical assistance in non-English languages
- Home language is not used as an eligibility criterion for publicly funded pre-K
- The state does not allow for reporting of DLL enrollment by home language
- Recruitment and enrollment materials are not provided in non-English languages
- Pre-K teachers are not required to have qualifications related to DLLs
- The state does not allocate extra state pre-K program resources to serve DLLs

Recommendations and Best Practices

Given the information presented in terms of research and strategies for increasing learning outcomes for DLLs, the following recommendations and best practices are offered for both the state of Missouri and local teachers and administrators.

State of Missouri:
Given the literature examined throughout the course of this document, both regarding best practices for boosting dual language learners in early education as well as in respect to actions already taken by the state of Missouri, the following best practices and recommendations for Missouri are as follows.

First, a recommendation for the state of Missouri would be to test whether a student qualifies as an English Language Learner before kindergarten entry. Starting and assessing early could be beneficial to supporting DLLs as they enter the K-12 system.

Additionally, another recommendation would be for the state of Missouri to move their Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) out of the pilot phase and into greater implementation throughout the state. Having a state quality assurance rating system for early childhood programs could help regulate DLL offerings and provide families more consistent measurement of quality for their early education system, which would be beneficial to all families, not just English learner households. Connecting to the above two points, another recommendation would be for the ESL standards to expand beyond primary and secondary education and for those same standards to be applied to or adapted for early education classrooms.

Lastly, we recommend offering more supports across the board for families, teachers, and school districts. There are a wide variety of supports that can be extended to LEP families that are not being offered in the state at this time. Examples of possible supports include translating website components into the families' home languages and hiring bilingual caseworkers. Additionally, research indicates that providing teachers with more training for DLL-specific needs produces positive outcomes for students, so the state could move forward in providing more training and could change requirements to require teachers to have DLL-related qualifications or allocate resources for DLL programs that could then go into further professional development.

School Administrators/Teachers:
While the recommendations for school administrators/teachers are less specific than those for the state of Missouri, it is important to note that there are a series of best practices that could be brought more into the classroom in support of DLL students in early education. First, it is important to act in discretion to your student body. That being said, as a school, offer training and professional development opportunities to staff when possible, especially if a void is noticed in your school community. Additionally, if possible, seek out available grant money for ongoing professional development opportunities. Then, more locally, strive to diversify curricula and early learning criteria, including the way that language is brought into the classroom. In the same vein, look for non-traditional sources for support, which could also include asking the students' parents for insights and information, if appropriate. Lastly, if deemed appropriate, do not be afraid to bring a student's home language into the classroom. While it could help the student and be informational for the teacher, it could also bring more variety and enrichment into the whole classroom.

Conclusion

As young learners strive to juggle the acquisition of two languages, one at home and one at school, they can face difficulties that can lead to a lagging in academic achievement as compared to their monolingual peers. While a lack of support for DLLs in early education can delay any needed specialized education before kindergarten, research indicates that there are a number of viable strategies that can be undertaken by a variety of stakeholders. Practices taken on by educators can work to incorporate the student's home language, through home language labels all the way through the utilization of two books in one language. Additionally, state actions such as earlier assessment and introducing more regulations for DLLs in preschool could help further contextualize future actions to guarantee that every student receives the education they need from the start.

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