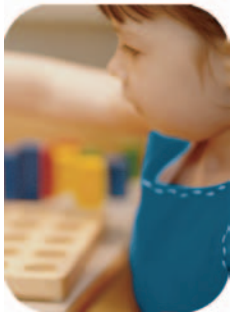
Early Childhood Education Brief

SECOND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT, 2005

10 Essential Research Findings



1. English Learners in the United States represent a variety of linguistic proficiency in native languages and English. Many enter schooling as emergent bilinguals in both languages, with some degree of proficiency in two languages. These students are referred to as "simultaneous" bilinguals, where exposure to two languages occurs early in life. Students who enter school monolingual in their native language are named "sequential bilinguals". These students quickly begin negotiating two languages, like their simultaneous bilingual peers. (Escamilla & Escamilla, 2003; McLaughlin, 1984)

2. Simultaneous bilingualism rarely means equal proficiency in both languages. The "variability" of contexts in which children are immersed impacts children's exposure to language, and as a consequence the development of linguistic proficiency in each language. Homes and schools are rarely balanced environments. Language and knowledge are gained in different domains, for different functions, not necessarily in the same domains or functions in both languages. (Valdés & Figueroa, 1994; Escamilla & Escamilla, 2003)

3. The development of bilingualism is a natural process (Escamilla & Escamilla, 2003). Research evidence compiled by Genesee (2002) suggests "human infants possess the biological capacity to acquire two languages as normally as one." (p.6). Infants, bilingual and monolingual alike, discriminate between languages at the same age, underscoring bilingual children are not delayed as a result of dual language exposure. Studies show that bilingual children in early stages of language acquisition can use their languages differentially and appropriately.

4. The development of a native language does not interfere with the development of a second language. Research shows that children exposed to two languages (native and English) fare similarly in English proficiency when compared to monolingual English speakers from similar minority backgrounds. The exposure to English alone does not necessarily result in the development of more English language proficiency. (Escamilla & Escamilla, 2003; Pearson, Fernandez & Oller, 1993; Cummins, 2000; Krashen, 1981, 1982; Thomas & Collier, 2002)

5. Preschool children learning English are expected to learn concepts and a new language at the same time. This cognitive "double-load" in the early stages of schooling defies the myth that children are the most efficient acquirers of a second language. While children are "wired" to learn more than one language, the manner in which a second language is presented and used in formal schooling affects the extent to which children acquire language and knowledge. (McLaughlin, 1984, 1992; Escamilla & Escamilla, 2003; Krashen, 1981, 1982)

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10 Essential Research Findings cont.

6. Shifts in language proficiency occur when formal schooling begins. Proficiency in the native language is lost when it ceases to be developed. This loss is characteristic of children placed in subtractive instructional environments, where English is the sole medium of instruction or where minimal attention is paid to the development of the native language. Sequential bilinguals begin to respond in English at school and home because it is the medium of instruction and because parents want their children to learn English. Children retain their ability to understand the native language because it continues to be spoken at home by their parents, but they lose their ability to speak it. (Escamilla & Escamilla, 2003; Cummins, 1989; Wong-Fillmore, 1989, 1991)

7. Studies by Wong-Fillmore (1989, 1991) highlight the consequences of children losing their home language. A child's shift from primarily using the native language to English can occur within a few months to two years in environments where English is the sole medium of instruction. As a consequence parents and children lose their ability to communicate, a crucial bond is placed at risk, and parents become disadvantaged in helping in the education of their children. Parent-child conversations involving "higher" order and critical thinking that further cognitive, linguistic and social development, which can only be had in a parent's dominant language, are diminished. (Cummins, 2005)

8. The research literature on sociocultural variables impacting the development of a second language is vast and complex. The home, school, community and societal contexts can either support or hinder its development. Across contexts, children need to be affirmed of their individual characteristics and talents, including their linguistic and cultural diversity. Policies that reserve bilingualism for the English dominant need to be challenged. Linguistic and cultural diversity needs to be central to the design of school curriculum, instruction and assessment policies. Children's background knowledge, experiences and communicative patterns are resources to draw upon to enhance the acquisition of a second language (Escamilla & Escamilla, 2003; Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003; Cummins, 2000; Nieto, 2004; Miramontes, Commins, Nadeau, 1997; Moll & González, 1997).

9. Research findings consistently show a positive and interdependent relationship between a first and second language. Children who come to school with a solid foundation in their native language perform better academically, than those who do not. Knowledge and skills learned at home in the native language transfer to the second language and support academic achievement in the second language. Instruction in the native language in school allows sequential bilinguals to continue to develop at high cognitive levels. Once concepts are learned in the native language, only labels and structures need to be taught in the second language. (Cummins, 2005, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 2002, 1997; Collier, 1995; Escamilla, Baca, Hoover & Almanza de Schonewise, 2005)

10. Language development is social in nature; it is acquired in interactive contexts for meaningful purposes. In early childhood, effective instruction offers emergent bilinguals language rich environments in which to safely explore language and their world and good English models to nurture the communicative competence fundamental for academic achievement. (Vygotsky, 1978; Krashen, 1981, 1982; Freeman & Freeman, 1994; Richard-Amato, 2003)

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