Assessing Young Dual Language Learners – What You Need to Know and Why

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Young Dual Language Learners

- Are increasing
  - Numbers attending Head Start
  - Numbers of languages served by programs

- Provides a challenge to programs who are to
  - Support children’s
    - Language development
    - Developing school readiness
  - Assess & monitor children’s abilities in both languages

- Purpose of this presentation
  - Discuss what is known about young DLLs’ development
  - Address the implications for assessment
Definition of Young DLLs

- Children who are learning 2 or more languages
  - Sequential Learners
    - Speak 1 language at home from birth &
    - Learn English later in life (usually at age 3 or when enter Head Start)
  - Simultaneous Learners
    - Learn two language at home
    - From birth
What do we know about young DLLs’ language development?

&

What does this mean for Head Start programs?
1. Bilingual language development is not the same as monolingual development

- Young DLLs
  - Say 1st words
  - Begin producing 2-word combinations
  - Use sentences at the same time as monolinguals

- But their path in each language may be different
  - Bilinguals are not “two monolinguals in one” (Grosjean, 1989)
  - Their language experiences are different than monolinguals
  - As a result, some aspects of language development may seem delayed compared to monolinguals
What does this mean for assessment?

- Cannot compare young DLLs’ language development to monolinguals’ development
- Need to understand the children’s language system
  - Assess children’s abilities in
    - their home language (L1) & English (L2)
  - If don’t speak L1, need to gather information
    - From parents (through interpreters)
    - Through the help of classroom assistants who know L1
- Assess/monitor children’s abilities over time
  - To make certain that development is occurring
2. Young DLLs need time to catch up to monolinguals

- On average, both sequential & simultaneous learners begin Head Start behind in
  - Vocabulary
  - Letter identification
  - Emergent writing

- In comparison to
  - Monolingual Head Start children
  - Average US preschoolers
Over time, catch up to monolinguals

- It takes
  - 2-3 years to catch up to monolinguals conversationally
  - 5-7 years to catch up to monolinguals academically
    (Cummins, 1981)

- Our data supports this
  - Longitudinal study of young DLLs
    - Two years in Head Start through
    - Early elementary school
Abilities in Early Elementary School

- SE and SI had age appropriate English
  - Phonological awareness
  - Emergent literacy abilities
  - Letter knowledge and early word identification
  - Reading comprehension
What does this mean for assessment?

- Give young DLLs time to learn English
- Don’t expect children to be fluent in 6 months
- Monitor/assess children’s language development over time
  - Make certain increases are occurring
  - Support children’s language development
    - Make certain that support is at the appropriate level for the children
3. Young DLLs’ vocabulary is the same as monolinguals

- If look at young DLLs’ vocabulary in each language,
  - may be behind monolinguals

- If combine vocabularies,
  - vocabulary size is the same as monolinguals

- Remember that young children’s vocabulary is context specific
  - Home vocabulary different than school vocabulary
    - May not learn school vocabulary items at home
      - Colors, shapes, classroom items
    - May not learn home vocabulary at school
      - Furniture, rooms, culture specific foods
What does this mean for assessment?

- Do not judge children’s vocabulary based on information in 1 language
  - Need to look at vocabulary in both languages
    - Obtain information from parents
- Do not expect that children will know “school” terms or concepts in their L1
  - These may not be taught at home (in either language) or
  - May be taught in English at home
4. Young DLLs use knowledge of L1 to learn a second language

- Children are not starting from the beginning when learning English
  - Their knowledge of L1 is very beneficial
- Similar to learning how to play a 2nd instrument
- Young DLLs use what they know about language (through their knowledge of L1) to learn English
  - Vocabulary/conceptual knowledge
    - Transfer all they know about “gato” once they learn the English label “cat”
  - Nouns, verbs, adjectives
  - Purposes of language – to request, to express ideas
Children use knowledge of language when learning to read in two languages.

- Transfer of phonological awareness between two languages
- **Growth** in Spanish language development during Head Start predicted
  - Kindergarten letter knowledge in Spanish & English
  - 1st Grade
    - Letter knowledge & Reading Comprehension in Spanish & English
- **Growth** in English language development also predicted
  - Kindergarten
  - 1st grade reading outcomes in Spanish & English

(Hammer, Lawrence & Miccio, 2007; Davison, Hammer, Lawrence & Miccio, 2008)
What does this mean?

- Important to support children’s L1 as they learn English
  - Definitely, support parents’ usage of L1 at home
  - When possible, support children’s developing knowledge about the world in L1
    - as they learn English in the classroom
- Without support of the home language, children’s abilities in L1 may not develop
What does this mean for assessment?

- Assess both languages to make certain L1 continues to develop.
- If development of L1 slows, determine if there is a change in language exposure:
  - At home
  - At school
5. Young DLLs differ in their abilities

- Wide range of individual differences
- Due to differences in
  - Age of exposure to two languages
  - Amount of exposure to two languages
    - which can vary based on communicative context
      - Home v. school
      - Topic of conversation or the activity
    - communicative partner
    - which can vary based on language of instruction
  - over time
    - with entrance into Head Start
    - at home
What does this mean for assessment?

- Gather information from the family on
  - Ages child spoken to and expected to communicate in
    - L1 & L2
  - Languages spoken at home
    - What languages
    - Who speaks what language(s) to the child
      - Presence of older siblings
      - Communication with grandparents
    - What languages child speaks to others
  - Where child has lived (or extended stays in home country)
    - Length of time
    - How recent the stays were
6. Usage of L1 at home is not bad for children’s English development

- We studied the effect of mothers’ language usage
  - During 2 years in HS and kindergarten
- Increased use of English over time
  - had no effect on
    - English vocabulary development
    - Emergent literacy development (measured in English)
  - slowed Spanish vocabulary development
- Continued usage of Spanish
  - had no effect on English vocabulary/emergent literacy
  - promoted Spanish vocabulary development

Hammer, Davison, Lawrence & Miccio (2008)
7. Language of instruction affects children’s language & literacy development

- Few studies in this area
- Dual language v. English immersion (Barnett et al., 2007)
  - No differences in English vocabulary & literacy development
  - Children in dual language made greater gains in Spanish vocabulary
What does this mean for assessment?

- Children make gains in English language and literacy during preschool
- Support of L1 is needed in order to observe gains in the child’s home language
- When assessing L1, recall children’s development may be slowed if
  - the children’s home language is not supported
8. Young DLLs cannot have a language disorder in only 1 language

- Learning two languages does not cause a language disorder
- If a child has a language disorder, the child will have a problem in both languages.
  - A child cannot have normal language development in L1 and a language disorder in English.
What does this mean for assessment?

- It is important to gather information about children’s abilities in both languages.
  - Without knowledge of L1, a child’s development of English cannot be understood.

- Monitor children’s abilities over time.
  - If you are concerned a child has a language disorder in English, determine if the child has a problem in L1.
    - If no problems in L1,
      - give the child time to learn English.
      - support the child’s development of English
        - Perhaps language levels in classroom and/or expectations are too high.
PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER
Recall:

- Young DLLs cannot be compared to monolinguals
- Young DLLs need time to catch up to monolinguals
- Differences exist among children based on age and amount of exposure to the two languages
- Children use knowledge of one language to learn a second language
- Home language usage does not hurt development of English
- A child does not have a language disorder unless there are concerns in both languages
Assess children’s abilities in both languages

- Collect info about child’s performance in the classroom
  - If you don’t know the child’s L1, employ the help of
    - a classroom assistant or
    - staff member who is fluent in L1
Include the family as part of the assessment

Gather background information
- Languages spoken by family members & child
- Ages child was exposed to the two languages
- Amount and consistency of exposure

Family’s opinion about the child’s abilities in L1 (& L2)
- Vocabulary
- Examples of typical and longest sentences produced
- Examples of questions and directions the child understands
- How the child compares to other children
Assess children’s abilities over time

- Young DLLs’ abilities are changing
  - Due to changes in language learning environment
- Need to assess more frequently than just beginning and end of the year.
  - Need to assess regularly to make certain children’s abilities are increasing
Benefits of Assessment

- The assessment will assist teachers determine what children need to work on in the classroom.
  - If child is not making progress, need to consider the language support provided in the classroom.
    - English language may be too complex
      - May need to adjust language to child’s abilities in English
      - But will also want to advance children’s world knowledge by supporting their abilities in L1.
    - Language may need to be more complex.
  - Ultimately, the assessment can be used to maximize children’s learning in the classroom.
THANK YOU! ¡GRACIAS!

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