Early Childhood Education for English Language Learners: Development, Strategies, and Services

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The English language learner (ELL) population is one of the fastest growing populations in the United States (Castro, 2014; Guzman-Orth et al., 2017). One in five children in the United States speaks a language other than English in the home (Liu et al., 2008). This statistic suggests that many children will be entering early childhood education program settings with a primary language other than English. The majority of educators in early childhood education are monolinguals, and even with a bilingual teaching assistant, many educators do not know how to incorporate that resource in their instructional practices (Castro et al., 2011). Participation in dual language programs is beneficial to literacy and language development in ELLs; however, a challenge to participation in high quality preschool programs is access, as these preschool programs are not universally free across the United States (Guzman-Orth et al., 2017). This article provides information and research on early childhood second language acquisition and development, teacher preparation and strategies for teaching ELL children, and special education assessments and services as they pertain to ELL students.

Second Language Acquisition and Development

- Some ELLs learn two languages simultaneously, and some learn one language after the other (Guzman-Orth et al., 2017).
- While children are learning new vocabulary and gaining understanding of a second language, it may seem like they are falling behind other children in language acquisition; however, it is normal for waves of language acquisition to occur (Clark, 2000).
- The language development of dual language learners follows the same pattern as monolingual development, and being bilingual has no negative effects on language development (Clark, 2000).
- The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) stresses the importance of children’s home language in their overall development and indicates that children’s home language does not interfere with their ability to learn English; knowing more than one language is an asset and not a limitation to their developmental progress (NAEYC, 1995).
- When individuals, including children, learn a second language, they bring the knowledge they have about learning a language from their first language into their experiences with their second language (Clark, 2000).
- Research and experience have established that children can learn more than one language, either simultaneously or sequentially, with no adverse effects (Goldenberg et al., 2013).
- There is no single explanation for why some people are successful at second language acquisition and some are not. There are many variables that contribute to this, and the process is not the same for all students (Castro et al., 2011; Clark, 2000).
- The stages of second language acquisition include preproduction, early production, speech emergence, and intermediate fluency (Lake & Pappampilriel, 2003).
- Research emphasizes the importance of oral language skills for second language acquisition and literacy development, since ELL students face the most difficulties in the areas of vocabulary (Castro et al., 2011; Guzman-Orth et al., 2017; Roessingh & Elgie, 2009).
ELLs often have to transition quickly from predominantly using their home language to English speaking classrooms, which makes it difficult for them to be active participants in their classrooms without support for their home language (Castro et al., 2011).

Longitudinal research is needed to learn more about ELL development in early childhood education experiences (Castro, 2014).

It is important for early childhood educators to understand language development characteristics of ELLs, and to be familiar with phases of second language learning so that they are able to provide high-quality learning opportunities and appropriate support services. An example of this is using visual aids or incorporating the student’s home language into their lessons (Castro, et al., 2011; Espinosa, 2007).

Preparation and Instructional Strategies to Promote Language Development

Teacher preparation is linked to the quality of early childhood education programs (Zepeda et al., 2011).

In order to support ELL students, early childhood educators must understand language development, understand the relationship between language and culture, develop skills and abilities to effectively teach DLLs, develop abilities to use assessment in meaningful ways for ELLs, develop a sense of professionalism, and understand how to work with families (Zepeda et al., 2011).

Developing an awareness and responsiveness to cultural and linguistic diversity is essential to the success of ELL students. Social and cultural context is critical for ELLs and their acceptance in early childhood classrooms (Lake & Pappamihiel, 2003; Zepeda et al., 2011).

Early childhood education programs should seek to assist faculty in moving from an awareness level to embracing a system that integrates ELL skill development within coursework (Zepeda et al., 2011).

Parental involvement is key to supporting children’s language learning. Research suggests that parents of ELL students consistently show interest in their children’s education and are highly motivated to provide support (Goldenberg et al., 2013; Schaller et al., 2007). Therefore, educators are advised to collaborate with families to promote the language development of their students.

Effective instruction for ELL students includes promoting language development in both English and the home language of the student. Incorporating ELL children’s home language in the early childhood curriculum and promoting language development in both languages are best practices for building English language skills (Goldenberg et al., 2013).

Teaching the component skills of reading is beneficial to all children, including ELL students. More specifically, ELLs benefit from explicit instruction on phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, oral reading fluency, reading comprehension, and writing. While proven to be successful, strategies may need to be adapted to specific needs of ELL students (August et al., 2014).

Targeted classroom supports, such as special focus on vocabulary development and English language and literacy development are effective methods for teaching ELLs (Fillmore & Snow, 2000; Zepeda et al., 2011).

Trained early childhood personnel, small child to staff ratio, and intensity of services, including strong supervision and oversight to maintain high standards, contribute to high quality instruction of ELL students (Barnett & Hustzedt, 2003; Rand Corporation, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2011).

Some ELL students may need additional support and accommodations, and they will benefit from visual representations of concepts and language-based explanations of a story for new vocabulary (Goldenberg et al., 2013; Zepeda et al., 2011).

Incorporating other forms of literacy into early childhood curriculum also assists in the development of acquiring a second language. Some of these strategies include drawing, music, and drama. Music can improve listening and oral language skill development, improve attention and memory, and enhance abstract thinking (Shin, 2010).
Special Education Assessment and Services

- In order to improve the quality of education and academic school readiness and provide appropriate individualized instruction, ELL’s achievement and development need to be accurately and appropriately assessed (Guzman-Orth et al., 2017).

- Traditionally, ELLs are assessed with dual language assessments in which their two languages are assessed and scored as separate language systems, and results are compared to each other. However, assessing languages as separate systems treats languages as separate sets of discrete skills that function independently, which is not how they function in reality (Guzman-Orth et al., 2017).

- Both general and special education teachers often have difficulty distinguishing a student’s learning difficulties with language difficulties, leading to referrals for evaluation (Hardin et al., 2007).

- There is a lack of consistency in methods for assessing dual language proficiency, and a lack of clarity of the purposes of screening and assessment tools (Hardin et al., 2007).

- A need exists for reliable and valid tools for screening and assessment in a variety of languages, as well as a need for trained interpreters to assist in the assessment process (Hardin et al., 2007).

- Educators have expressed the need for proper professional training in understanding the purposes and uses of screening, assessment, and language proficiency measures as well as in developing procedures that more effectively distinguish learning difficulties from language difficulties, and strategies for supporting dual language development in the classroom (Hardin et al., 2007).

- Many special education programs have begun to shift their focus to addressing the need for interventions that will aid in reducing the gap between ELLs and their native English-speaking peers, based on patterns of low academic achievement, high rates of retention and school attrition, and disproportionate representation of ELLs in special education programs (Liu et al., 2008; Ortiz & Yates, 2001).

- A response to intervention framework seems to be beneficial to ELLs through early intervention strategies before they have the chance to fail in school (Xu & Drame, 2008).

- The main goal of dual language assessments is to ensure that incoming students are ready to begin kindergarten and to ensure cultural and linguistic factors are acknowledged. There is a need for assessment methods that take into account cultural and linguistic diversity of ELLs (Guzman-Orth et al., 2017).

- The content of dual language assessments should be relevant and engaging to all students regardless of their background and should provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their language abilities, skills, and knowledge (Guzman-Orth et al., 2017).

- Recommendations for improving assessment of ELLs’ language proficiency and learning ability include assessing students in both languages, using both formal and informal assessment measures, and obtaining parent and family input to create a more comprehensive profile of the individual (Liu et al., 2008).

- Policies and procedures in special education must be modified to address the linguistic and cultural characteristics of individual students. Prevention and intervention services for ELLs with learning disabilities should be incorporated into policies and procedures (Ortiz & Yates, 2001).

- Special education leaders and general educators should work together to design and implement an appropriate service delivery for ELLs (Ortiz & Yates, 2001).

REFERENCES


