

PREPARING YOUNG LATINO CHILDREN FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS: BEST PRACTICES IN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

By Erika Beltrán

Summary

Language development is the key to literacy development and is often a predictor of a child's academic success. For young Latino* children, many of whom are English language learners (ELLs), early learning programs can provide significant language supports to help them prepare for school success. Children acquiring English as a second language, however, have a very distinct path toward language development, and instructional strategies must be carefully designed to ensure ELLs are acquiring language at a developmentally appropriate pace. This policy brief highlights the importance of intentional language instruction for Hispanic children, particularly ELLs, highlights a best practice in the field, and concludes with policy recommendations for bringing successful programs to scale.†

Introduction

Advocates and researchers have long touted the importance of language development in the earliest years of life. From birth through age three, children are rapidly developing new cognitive, social, and linguistic skills. As early as 15 to 18 months of age, children acquire vocabulary and learn to communicate effectively. In language-rich environments, children's language skills grow exponentially and build a strong foundation for literacy.

However, not all children are exposed to language-rich environments at an early age, and evidence shows significant disadvantages for children who grow up in

* The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

† This paper was authored by Erika Beltrán, Senior Policy Analyst, Education and Children's Policy Project in the Office of Research, Advocacy, and Legislation at the National Council of La Raza (NCLR). It was funded in part by the Pritzker Children's Initiative, the Birth to Five Policy Alliance, and a funder who wishes to remain anonymous. The findings and conclusions presented are those of the author and NCLR alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of our funders. Permission to copy, disseminate, or otherwise use information from this paper is granted, provided that appropriate credit is given to NCLR.

Inside

Summary	1
Introduction.....	1
Background	2
Best Practice: East Coast Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Program, Okeechobee 2 Center	3
Policy Recommendations.....	6
Endnotes	8

low-income households and in families with lower levels of parental education.¹ Formal assessments of language development, for example, have shown that three-year-old children raised in homes characterized by high levels of poverty have a significantly smaller vocabulary than children who grow up in homes with high incomes and high parent-education levels.² Evidence also shows that these gaps continue to widen as children enter the formal K–12 system.

These findings create a sense of urgency about the future prospects of young Latino children, many of whom face significant barriers to learning. Low levels of maternal education are tied to a child's exposure to language and vocabulary development; in 2008, more than two-fifths (42%) of Latino children under age 18 had mothers who did not graduate from high school.³ Additionally, nearly one-quarter (23%) of young Hispanics lived in linguistically isolated households.⁴ Although the vast majority of Latino children learn English as their primary language, many have parents who are unable to provide academic support or effectively interact with school systems because of their limited English proficiency. Compounding these challenges is that almost three-fifths (59%) of Hispanic children are from low-income families, twice the proportion of White children (27%).⁵

Despite these challenges, early learning programs present significant opportunities for Hispanic children and, if well-designed, can help close the school readiness gap described above. High-quality programs that develop effective instruction for ELL children are essential to ensuring the school success of Latino children. Moreover, it is critically important that policymakers, advocates, and practitioners consider the contributions of

neuroscience and second-language acquisition experts when designing instructional strategies for young ELL children.

Background

Policymakers and advocates are paying closer attention to how early learning programs deliver services to a growing and diverse population of young children. Evidence of this can be found in the recent revision of the *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework* (now called the *Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework*) and, in the case of California, early learning standards for English-language development. These efforts have emphasized the need to more carefully examine how the language development needs of ELLs are being met and how instructional strategies should be adapted for children acquiring a second language. Although these efforts are commendable and a sign of progress in the early learning field, many programs continue to struggle with providing comprehensive language instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse children.

In the past decade, research on bilingual language development has grown considerably. Studies point to evidence of increased mental flexibility and cognitive advantages for bilingual children⁶ and an increased understanding that early exposure to two languages has a positive impact on the linguistic, cognitive, and reading development of young children.⁷

Most importantly, and perhaps in contrast to many state and local educational policies and practices, language-acquisition research clearly states that bilingualism imparts no developmental disadvantages and that the native language acts as a foundation upon which a second language is built.⁸ Study after

study has shown correlations between native language and English vocabulary scores, proving that higher levels of native-language proficiency lead to higher levels of English-language proficiency.⁹

Although the evidence for native language supports continues to build, most early learning programs are not employing instructional strategies that leverage the use of the native language. Many classrooms use “English immersion,” where children are taught exclusively in English. Some programs use “transitional bilingual education,” where teachers use the home language to transition students toward oral and written proficiency in English.¹⁰

A promising trend is the development of “dual-language” programs. Dual-language programs are a proven approach for teaching young ELLs because it allows children to learn academic subject matter while also acquiring fluency in English. Moreover, dual-language exposure has been found to deepen reading and phoneme-awareness skills,* which are vital to reading success both for ELLs and monolingual English-speakers.¹¹ This research puts to rest the fear that introducing more than one language to young children results in delayed linguistic development.

The advantages of bilingual instruction must be part of any policy discussion to ensure that preschool programs benefit all children. Fortunately, there are models across the country that are successfully implementing dual-language instruction and finding huge success in young children’s developmental and early learning outcomes. One such model is the East Coast Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Program (hereafter East Coast), an NCLR

Affiliate that serves thousands of migrant children who travel with their parents from Florida through New York as part of a migrant worker stream.

Best Practice: East Coast Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Program, Okeechobee 2 Center

The East Coast Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Program, an NCLR Affiliate with 60 centers along the east coast,[†] has developed an effective instructional program that supports the home language while also supporting the acquisition of English as a second language in various centers, including the Okeechobee 2 Center in southern Florida.

The East Coast Okeechobee 2 Center serves migrant farmworkers primarily from Mexico who speak Spanish. Like most migrant farmworker families across the country, the families served by East Coast live in deep poverty and have annual incomes between \$8,000 and \$10,000. Most families have lived in the United States for two to five years and have very low literacy levels. Families spend an average of forty hours per week working in fields and are susceptible to various health risks due to constant exposure to pesticides. Often, children are brought into the field when parents are unable to afford child care. Fortunately, the migrant and seasonal farmworker families in Okeechobee, Florida have two East Coast programs available to them.

East Coast’s unique model is designed to recognize the strengths of families and provides holistic, high-quality early childhood services in a culturally responsive environment. Like most Head Start

* Phoneme awareness is the ability to identify phonemes, the vocal gestures from which words are constructed.

† Sites include locations in Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York.

programs, East Coast uses *The Creative Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers* and *The Creative Curriculum for Early Childhood* (for preschoolers), which serves as a framework for classrooms in all 60 centers. East Coast, however, has added supplemental material and developed the East Coast *Our Children, Our Families* curriculum, which was created to better meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse children and families. The curriculum targets three areas: language and literacy skills of dual-language learners, math and science skills of dual-language learners, and cultural relevancy of classroom materials and experiences.

In developing the *Our Children, Our Families* curriculum, East Coast engaged with parents, teachers, and community members to form a curriculum advisory group. The group developed a broad framework to guide the creation of the curriculum, which was grounded in incorporating evidence-based practices with children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The curriculum incorporates activities that develop children's home language and literacy skills while leveraging family strengths, and is based on the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework.

Supporting Dual-Language Learning

East Coast has developed rigorous student learning benchmarks and guidance to support dual-language learning in their programs, and outline clear roles for teachers in helping children develop two languages. Classroom activities are based on first learning about the families represented and their cultural practices and uses of languages. Teachers are encouraged to do home visits to gain a better understanding of their students' needs. Additionally, each classroom is heavily labeled in both English and Spanish and has a consistent language role model, meaning that

each classroom teacher will only communicate with students in either English or Spanish.

Teachers are taught to be positive about a child's home language and to observe children closely, responding to their interests and use of language. Lessons often start with what children know and progress slowly to ensure that all children feel safe in communicating their needs and so that communication can flow naturally in each language. Most importantly, teachers are instructed to be good language role models and to accept the use of any combination of a child's home language and English (code-switching), encouraging children to talk in accordance with their own pace and ability.

Maintaining the home language is essential to the East Coast program, as it teaches children to value their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. East Coast staff are encouraged to integrate the home language into daily activities, particularly for infants and toddlers. Although teachers are also encouraged to use English, it is important that infants and toddlers continue to hear their native language to create a safe and caring environment.

Toddlers, who are at a critical state in language development, are also placed in classrooms that emphasize the home language and more intentionally integrate the English language through labeling, repeating words, asking openended questions, and using books, music, and finger plays. By the preschool ages, children are exposed to English language instruction more frequently; however, the home language is still part of daily lessons and interactions. In classrooms where the teachers are not fluent in the home language, programs are given strategies to engage families to read stories or to use tape recordings of stories for children to continue engaging in both languages (see Table 1).

Table 1. Tracking Student Language Development—Head Start Child Outcomes and Early Learning Framework

Language Development	English Language Development
<p>Receptive Language Skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attends to language during conversations or other language experiences • Comprehends increasingly complex and varied vocabulary • Comprehends different forms of language, such as questions or exclamations • Comprehends different grammatical structures or rules for using language 	<p>Receptive English Language Skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participates with movement and gestures • Acknowledges or responds nonverbally to common English words or phrases • Points to body parts when asked • Comprehends and responds to increasingly complex and varied English vocabulary • Follows multistep directions in English with minimal cues or assistance
<p>Expressive Language Skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engages in communication and conversations with others • Uses language to express ideas and need • Uses increasingly complex and varied vocabulary • Uses different forms of language • Uses different grammatical structures for a variety of purposes • Engages in storytelling • Holds conversations with peers and adults 	<p>Expressive English Language Skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeats words or phrases to self • Requests items in English, such as “ball” • Uses one or two English words, sometimes joined to represent a bigger idea, such as “throw ball” • Uses increasingly complex and varied English vocabulary • Constructs sentences, such as “the apple is round”
<p>Engagement in Literacy Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Book knowledge and appreciations • Phonological awareness • Alphabet knowledge • Print concepts and conventions • Early writing 	<p>Engagement in English Literacy Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates eagerness to participate in songs, rhymes, and stories in English • Points to pictures and says the word in English, such as “frog” • Learns parts of a song or poem in English and repeats it

Source: Office of Head Start, *Head Start Child Outcomes and Early Learning Framework* (Washington, DC: Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).

Professional Development and Student Outcomes

The *Our Children, Our Families* curriculum is supported by implementing an “anti-bias” curriculum as part of the professional development training program for East Coast teachers. This training helps teachers ensure that classroom strategies take into account racial differences and similarities, disabilities, gender identity, and cultural differences. This training requires that teachers respect diversity by acknowledging differences, designing learning activities based on interests of students, and the creation of inclusive classrooms and activities that create a comfortable space for children of diverse backgrounds.

Anecdotal evidence from parents suggests that students are acquiring literacy in both languages in addition to acquiring content knowledge in other domains, such as numeracy. Data collected by East Coast also show positive trends in Head Start outcomes for students participating in the program. For example, at the Florida site, only 10% of preschool students had achieved high levels of English proficiency at the start of the program, compared to 33% of students by the program’s end. Furthermore, data show that 90% of children demonstrated pre-writing skills by the end of the program as compared to just 39% at the start.¹²

Policy Recommendations

For Latino and ELL children, intentional language development and instruction is key to ensuring how well children are prepared to enter the K–12 system. The East Coast program, based on the Head Start Child Development and Child Outcome Framework, is a comprehensive model that has clear implications for broader policy development. Federal and state policymakers play an important role in developing systems that can support high-quality early learning

programs for Hispanic and ELL children and families. Below are federal and state policy recommendations that would promote effective language instruction in early learning programs.

Federal Policymakers

Support the expansion of dual-language early learning programs. Evaluations of dual-language preschool programs have found significant gains in Spanish vocabulary and English language abilities compared to English immersion programs for native Spanish speakers.¹³ Evaluations have also found that dual-language programs are not only effective for students acquiring English, but also promote bilingualism and biliteracy for native English-speaking children.

Congress should incentivize partnerships between Local Education Agencies and Early Childhood Education (ECE) providers, including state preschool programs and Head Start, to coordinate efforts to (1) serve cohorts of economically disadvantaged minority students and students with limited English proficiency from preschool through fifth grade, (2) establish an infrastructure that supports a rigorous assessment system, (3) provide ongoing communication and professional training, with a particular focus on second-language learners, (4) use valid and comprehensive assessment and models of effective parent engagement, and (5) develop strategies to recruit, support, and train a diverse and qualified workforce.

Require states to develop early learning guidelines that take into account the learning needs of ELL children by creating benchmarks related to English-language development. NCLR research¹⁴ revealed that very few states have early learning standards that take into account the learning needs of ELL children. Congress should consider legislation that

incentivizes states to develop comprehensive, inclusive early learning standards that will create a demand for intentional and effective instructional methods and professional development strategies that help all teachers understand how to monitor progress for young ELL children.

State Policymakers

Create professional development programs that attract and retain culturally and linguistically diverse educators. Instruction for language development for culturally and linguistically diverse children will only improve if early learning programs are successful at recruiting and retaining diverse staff. The most promising strategies for recruiting and retaining the ECE workforce, such as T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood,* include programs that provide scholarships, tuition assistance, flexible schedules, and increases in compensation. As states reexamine their professional development systems, it is important that these types of programs have sufficient resources to grow and expand and that they are accessible to ECE educators who speak languages other than English.

Ensure that preschool teachers are trained to work with young ELL children and their families. The preschool workforce plays a pivotal role in the social and cognitive development of young children. The ability of the educator to build strong, trusting relationships with children and to create a culturally responsive learning environment is one of the most important quality indicators of early learning programs. Policymakers should require that states build specific training in second language learning and working with second language learners into their state early childhood professional development plans.

* T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood is a comprehensive scholarship program that provides the early childhood workforce with access to education. By promoting higher education, the program creates a well-qualified, fairly compensated, and stable workforce in the early learning field.

Endnotes

- 1 Miriam Calderon, *Buenos Principios: Latino Children in the Earliest Years of Life*, (Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza, 2007).
- 2 Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, *A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy: Using Evidence to Improve Outcomes in Learning, Behavior, and Health for Vulnerable Children* (Cambridge, MA: Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University) http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/reports_and_working_papers/policy_framework/ (accessed February 8, 2012).
- 3 Mark Mather and Patricia Foxen, *America's Future: Latino Child Well-Being in Numbers and Trends* (Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza, 2010).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Jim Cummins, "Linguistic Interdependence and the Educational Development of Bilingual Children," *Review of Educational Research* 49 (1979): 222–251; and N. T. Darcy and M. Gulaston, "A Review of the Literature of the Effects of Bilingualism Upon the Measure of Intelligence," *Journal of Genetic Psychology* 82 (1953): 21–57; and Eugene Garcia, *Bilingualism in Early Childhood* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983).
- 7 Laura-Ann Petitto and Kevin Dunbar, *New Findings from Educational Neuroscience on Bilingual Brains, Scientific Brains, and the Educated Mind* (Conference on Building Usable Knowledge in Mind, Brain & Education, Harvard University, 2004) http://schools.u-46.org/public/MBE_Petitto-DunbarFinalFinal.pdf (accessed March 16, 2011).
- 8 Kenji Hakuta, *Second-Language Acquisition, Bilingual Education and Prospects for a Language-Rich Nation* (Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers, 1993).
- 9 Jim Cummins, "Bilingual Education and English Immersion: The Ramirez Report in Theoretical Perspective," *Bilingual Research Journal: The Journal of the National Association for Bilingual Education* 16, no. 1–2 (Winter–Spring 1992): 91–104.
- 10 Annette M. Zehler et al., *Policy Report: Summary Of Findings Related to LEP And SpEd-LEP Students*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition, 2003).
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 East Coast Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Program, *Child Outcomes Report* (Stuart, FL: East Coast Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Program, 2010).
- 13 Laura-Ann Petitto and Kevin Dunbar, *New Findings from Educational Neuroscience on Bilingual Brains, Scientific Brains, and the Educated Mind* (Conference on Building Usable Knowledge in Mind, Brain & Education, Harvard University, 2004), http://schools.u-46.org/public/MBE_Petitto-DunbarFinalFinal.pdf (accessed March 16, 2011).
- 14 Erika Beltrán, *Preschool Education: Delivering on the Promise of Preschool for Latino Children* (Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza, 2011).