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Teaching Multicultural and English Language Learners

By Peggy Cerna

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Summary

Teachers need to be prepared with materials and strategies that work for the diverse students who enter their classrooms in increasing numbers each year.

-Peggy Cerna

There is a marked increase of diversity in American public schools today. In 2003, 42 percent of American public school children were of racial or minorities, up 22 percent from 30 years before. Most of this increase in diversity was due to immigration from Latin America and Asia, and with this increase in ethnic diversity came a corresponding increase in linguistic diversity (Herr and Cunningham, 2007).

Research has repeatedly shown that for minority prekindergarten children, access to books, the amount of exposure they have to shared reading, and phonemic awareness activities such as songs, rhymes, and chants are important predictors of future literacy skills. Many children who enter kindergarten without pre-reading skills never catch up, according to “America’s Early Childhood Literacy Gap,” a 2009 report from Jumpstart, a national early education organization dedicated to advancing school readiness in low-income communities.

Children who have an opportunity to develop basic foundational skills in language and literacy in prekindergarten enter kindergarten ready to learn to read and write (Ballantyne, Sanderman, and McLaughlin, 2008). Young English language learners need special support if they are expected to compete with their native English-speaking peers.

Research suggests that the lack of adequate vocabulary is one barrier to reading for English language learners. Research on vocabulary acquisition (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan; Hu and Nation; Nation) indicates that a successful vocabulary development program should include at least the following five components:

- Intentional word selection (Words that represent new concepts are important outside the specific activity, or cross content areas.)
- Direct instruction in word meaning and in strategies used to learn new words
- Modeling of strategies and processes for learning new words
- Multiple exposures to new words and opportunities to use new words (intentional word-focused activities and ongoing review)
- A system to help track new vocabulary

How Do We Help Multicultural and English Language Learners?



Essential to any good program for English language learners is effective instruction in language development. Children need **explicit instruction in English vocabulary**, as well as **opportunities to hear and speak the language throughout the day**. Examples of strategies are listed below:

- Presenting vocabulary thematically helps children make associations between words and scaffolds students' learning (McGee and Richgels, 2003).
- Read-alouds that include explanations of targeted vocabulary can support word learning (Brabham and Lynch-Brown, 2002; Coyne, Simmons, Kame'enul, and Stoolmiller, 2004), as can dramatic play organized around a carefully chosen theme (Barone and Xu, 2008; Tabors, 2008).
- Self-directed activities that allow ELLs to choose activities that match both their interests and their language abilities provide another opportunity (Bruce and Watkins, 1995).

Another important focus for preschool ELLs should be **Literacy Development**. Early literacy skills appropriate to prekindergarten include:

- **Alphabet Knowledge**—Recognizing and naming uppercase and lowercase letters and beginning to associate letters with the sounds they make.
- **Phonological Awareness**—The ability to manipulate the sounds that make up a language, independent of meaning. In prekindergarten, children benefit greatly from learning to recognize rhyming words, listening for syllables within words, learning to recognize beginning sounds in words, and matching those sounds to letters.
- **Print Awareness**—Understanding the features of books and print. Children should be taught to recognize the parts of a book (e.g., front and back covers, top and bottom). They need to learn that printed letters and words run from left to right and from top to bottom, and that a book has a title, was written by an author, and has illustrations that were drawn by an illustrator.

Instructional Strategies to Support Multicultural and English Language Learners

Teachers can use many strategies to help children gain the language instruction they need. Instruction should be designed to focus on foundational literacy skills that include:

- Interactive storybook reading.
- “Pretend” reading and writing.
- Games and other activities to help children identify the letters of the alphabet.
- Interactive experiences with language and print through poems, nursery rhymes, and songs.
- Use of home language to teach rhymes and songs, share storybooks, and play word games.

Choosing a Quality Early Childhood Program for Multicultural and English Language Learners

Educators should look for programs that use methods and strategies that research has proven effective in preparing young ELLs for kindergarten. First, children need explicit, systematic instruction in vocabulary. Second, teachers need to expose ELLs to rich language through shared book reading and activities that develop oral language and literacy. Third, children need to engage in activities that develop alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and print awareness.

The DLM Early Childhood Express® Hits the Mark!

The DLM Early Childhood Express®, a comprehensive research-based program for prekindergarten, from McGraw-Hill, hits the mark because it includes everything necessary to prepare young English language learners for success by giving them an opportunity to develop basic foundational skills in language and literacy. Essential features for effective language instruction for English language learners, based on a review of research, were intentionally integrated into *The DLM Early Childhood Express*®, including:

- **Concepts and Vocabulary**—*Concept Big Books* contain content-specific vocabulary that prekindergarten children need to learn. Additional reinforcement for targeted vocabulary is provided through the *Alphabet Wall Cards* and *Subject-Area Vocabulary*. The combined use of these materials ensures that vocabulary is taught and practiced in context.
- **Phonological Awareness**—Writers have included a number of fun and exciting strategies that teach phonological awareness and include the use of home language to teach rhymes and songs, word games, and fingerplays in the *Rhymes and Chants Flip Chart* and the *Teacher's Treasure Book*.
- **Connections to Prior Knowledge**—Writers accelerate English literacy development by using *Oral Language Development Cards* to make the connection between what they know in their first language and what they need to know in English. The *ABC Picture Cards* and *Photo Library CD-ROM* provide more interactive and hands-on opportunities for English language learners to gain the vocabulary they need.
- **Multicultural Materials**—*Concept Big Books* and *Literature Books* are available in both English and Spanish and include multicultural titles that children can identify with and make connections. The *Photo Library CD-ROM* gives additional visual support for letters, words, and concepts to English language learners.
- **Learning Centers**—This program contains activities for centers throughout each week in the Teacher's Editions. This feature is a valuable tool that can be used to give English language learners multiple opportunities to revisit concepts and vocabulary taught previously. The section titled *Learning Centers* also gives children ample opportunities for repetition of targeted language and vocabulary, a strategy research has proven to be very effective with multicultural learners.

In addition to these features, *The DLM Early Childhood Express*® provides teachers with information about teaching multicultural and English language learners. The program provides multiple strategies that can be used to build the background and knowledge children need so they can understand new vocabulary and become fluent speakers and readers. All proficiency levels are addressed and primary language materials are included with visual displays, charts, and models for building background knowledge. In a supportive environment with quality instruction and materials, all English learners have the opportunity to learn.

Peggy Cerna is a consultant for early childhood and is presently writing a series of bilingual informational books for prekindergarten children targeting the Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines for Science. Previously, she was principal of the Rosita Valley Literacy Academy in Eagle Pass, Texas, a border town to Mexico that included the children from the Kickapoo Indian Reservation. She also opened Lucy Read Pre-Kindergarten Demonstration School for the Austin Independent School District that houses 600 four-year-olds from inner city Austin. The Lucy Read Principal Foundation was established in her honor after she retired as a principal from Lucy Read Pre-Kindergarten Demonstration School. She has taught a variety of courses in Sul Ross State University's teacher-credentialing program. A former bilingual reading specialist and principal for several Early Childhood Education schools, she has also taught public school bilingual students in all elementary grade levels. She is a co-author for McGraw-Hill's new DLM Early Childhood Express®.

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Notes





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