

# The Challenge of Working with Dual Language Learners

## Three Perspectives: Supervisor, Mentor, and Teacher

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Doris Hoover, and  
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**C**hances are, many of you have a child who is a dual language learner (DLL) in your class. In 2004, 19 percent of the school-age population in the United States spoke a home language other than English (National Center for Education Statistics 2004). By 2030, dual language learners are expected to comprise 40 percent of the school-age population (Thomas & Collier 2002). Therefore, teachers need to be prepared to provide quality education for this growing population. For teachers of dual language learners, the challenges involve not only preparing the environment but also interacting and accurately assessing those children's development and learning.

This article offers strategies and concrete ideas for supporting young DLLs in early childhood classrooms. It is organized into three sections, with the largest section written by a practicing teacher. If you are a classroom teacher, you may be thinking, "Let's

 **2, 3, 7, 10**



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skip to the teacher section.” Go right ahead. You may get some ideas to use in your class next week.

It was our intention in writing this article that teachers across the country would tear it out of *Young Children* and hang it on their bulletin boards as a reminder of good, doable practices. Used separately, each practice can improve teaching and learning. But together, we believe they will ensure effective programs that allow dual language learners to succeed. We believe in encouraging children and teachers to take risks and to embrace challenge and diversity.

### **Ideas from Maricarmen, a supervisor**

The needs of children in early childhood settings are based on their individual developmental stage. Those needs are best met in settings where teachers use developmentally appropriate practices—teaching practices that match the way children develop and learn (Copple & Bredekamp 2009). Many non-English-speaking children have their first classroom experiences in developmentally appropriate settings. The administrator’s main responsibility is to facilitate teachers’ growth and to support staff through engaging leadership and carefully planned professional development. The staff need a clear understanding of the program expectations and the instructional goals.



With that in mind, I have listed some useful ideas for administrators in helping staff understand and address the needs of dual language learners. We use these ideas in our school district, with over a thousand children who are DLLs, most of whom speak Spanish or Vietnamese as their home language.

### **Suggestions for administrators**

- Clearly state your vision for what you want the program to become, and then elaborate on the specific goals needed to achieve that vision. Make sure you develop and share those goals with the teachers and with other school administrators.
- Advocate for the possibilities and benefits of bilingualism in the classroom. While speaking English is crucial for children’s success in school, maintaining their home language also supports learning, increases children’s self-esteem, and takes them a step closer to being successful in life. It is important for administrators to commit to and set the stage for bilingualism in the classroom.
- Do your research. Do you know the trends in teaching and supporting second language acquisition? Although you do not have to be an authority, teachers will trust and appreciate a leader who takes the time to keep up-to-date about the subject.
- Organize professional development to help staff understand the stages of second language acquisition for young dual language learners. A favorite strategy among our staff is visiting model classrooms. Visitors benefit from observ-



**It is important for administrators to commit to and set the stage for bilingualism in the classroom.**



ing effective strategies being implemented by fellow teachers in settings similar to their own.

### Ideas from Doris, a mentor

As a mentor, I have the exciting job of supporting classroom teachers whose classes include children coming to school speaking languages other than English. The first thing I do is to see if there is home language support in the school for such a child. For Spanish-speaking children, there are usually Spanish speakers available. If the classroom teacher or teacher assistant speaks Spanish, I meet with that adult to remind him or her that children's development and retention of their home language does not interfere with their ability to learn English (NAEYC 2005; Espinosa 2008; Prieto 2009).

### Suggestions for bilingual adults in the classroom

Here are some suggestions the bilingual adult can use to support children who are DLLs:

- Acquire good literature and read to the child in his home language
- Ask the child higher level questions in his language
- Initiate conversations and encourage the child's use of the home language

- Model quality use of the language
- Sing and do word plays in the language

### When no adult speaks a child's home language

When no adults in the classroom speak a child's home language, I help teachers come up with strategies that show support for the language, such as providing visible signs of the language throughout the learning environment (NAEYC 2005). These are suggestions to use when no adult speaks a child's home language:

- Provide books and other relevant reading material in the child's language
- Encourage the parents to read and speak to the child in their home language
- Learn to *correctly* speak a few useful words and phrases in the language, such as "hello," "good morning," and "Do you need to use the bathroom?"
- Give the child a Survival Phrases chart (see p. 30), with photos depicting daily routines and basic needs, so she can communicate her needs by pointing to the pictures until she learn the words in English
- Support English vocabulary development by using pictures, gestures, and props to give meaning to new words
- Model quality English

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## SUPPORTING ALL KINDS OF LEARNERS

- Learn about the child's culture and find ways to validate it
- Provide opportunities for the child to express himself across the curriculum by using art, music, gross motor activities, and other nonverbal types of expression
- Be sensitive to the fact that the child may feel lonely, fearful, or abandoned because no one speaks her language

### Strategies to enhance children's comprehension of the new language

- Accompany your words with gestures and actions
- Support essential vocabulary with photos illustrating the words
- Speak clearly and slowly
- Choose the words you want to use as cues for your routines, and try to consistently use those same words each time—for example, always say, "Let's sit in a circle" rather than sometimes saying, "It's time to sit on the rug" or "Come on, everybody, let's sit over here"
- Provide opportunities to repeat and practice new vocabulary
- Use predictable books and stories with simple wording
- Sing simple songs that reinforce vocabulary
- Scaffold a child's learning as she attempts to use the new language



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### Suggestions for working with the families of DLLs

Another topic I talk about with teachers is how to actively involve the family. We discuss what a valuable resource parents are in the education of their children. Together we plan ways to tailor family involvement strategies to encourage all families to take part in the program.

- Post a Welcome sign by your door in the language of each child
- Provide an interpreter to help communicate with the family, if necessary
- Meet with the families individually as well as in a Parent Night setting
- Explain to the parents how being bilingual supports learning, and encourage them to maintain the home language with their child
- Create an atmosphere in which sharing cultures is valued
- Invite the parents to share with the class typical foods, cultural items, holiday traditions, songs, games, stories, folktales, dances, and music
- Ask the family to assist you in understanding the child's home culture
- If you don't speak the child's home language, ask the parents to write out some key words and help you learn their pronunciation



- Keep the family informed about class topics and activities through a family bulletin board with photos, labels, and such (be sure all the children are represented in the photos)
- Stock books in each child's home language in a home lending library

Involving families may be the most challenging aspect of having DLLs in your class. But when families feel that the school community respects their language and culture, they will be more supportive of classroom goals. Furthermore, teachers are enriched by opportunities to learn about cultures and languages different from their own.

### Ideas from Cindy, a teacher

The teacher's main responsibility in an early childhood classroom with dual language learners is to support children's individual growth by setting up opportunities for interactions with other children and with adults (Pence, Justice, & Wiggins 2008). To support all children's language acquisition, the strategies I rely on most include scaffolding, modeling language, and repetition.

In the following sections, I discuss my lesson-planning process and illustrate how different interactions occur by

describing the routines and sharing snippets of conversation from my class of 3- to 5-year-olds, the Snowflakes. Most of the children speak Spanish or Vietnamese as their home language.

### Lesson plans

Before I begin the day, I need a well thought-out lesson plan. Like most early childhood teachers, my goal in lesson plan writing is to create a learning environment that allows the children to really *feel* and *experience* the unit of study. Having one theme run throughout the room (like farm animals in the blocks area, farmer puppets in the library, and farming tools on the playground) provides frequent opportunities to reinforce the concepts the teacher assistant and I are teaching.

When writing plans in a classroom with one or many dual language learners, it is not enough to have just theme-related puzzles and rubber stamps. English language acquisition is enhanced when teachers

- emphasize the actual language and words in the unit of study
- use a prop or an action, gesture, expression, or special voice
- find or write simple songs to reinforce the words of the week

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- provide many varied and repetitious opportunities for children to practice saying their new words

I use these techniques, and those described next in “Vocabulary,” across content areas. They reinforce language acquisition and learning not only for the dual language learners in the class, but for all children.

### Vocabulary

I carefully consider the 5–8 vocabulary words I will introduce or reinforce that week, which include a mix of verbs, nouns, and adjectives. My whole lesson plan revolves around those words. I write simple songs/chants to go along with the week’s vocabulary, and we sing them during transition times. Throughout the week, I am consistent in using those particular words, not synonyms, in large group settings and with the dual language learners. Repetitious use of vocabulary words and frequent opportunities for the children to repeat modeled sentences help the children develop their English language skills.

### Support for Spanish speakers

During choice time, Ms. Leti, the bilingual teaching assistant, works individually or with small groups of children, engaging them in Spanish conversation about the toys they explore or the Spanish books they read together. This enhances communication in their home language, conversation development, and problem-solving skills.

Once a week, I conduct the morning meeting and message time in Spanish instead of English. I support everything I say with gestures and props. Much like the children’s language acquisition, my second language occasionally has errors in grammar or word choice. When necessary, Ms. Leti scaffolds my Spanish, just as we do with the children—for example, when I spoke about shopping but used the incorrect word for shirt (*camisa*):

**Ms. C:** *Ayer, yo compré un camiso en la tienda.*

**Ms. L:** *Ayer, yo tambien compre una camisa* [with emphasis on the *-a* in *camisa*].

I laughed and repeated the sentence correctly. Sometimes I ask one of the Spanish-speaking children to help me with a word, giving the child a sense of

validation for the home language and a feeling of importance in the classroom community.

I use a number of different routines to engage dual language learners in morning meeting activities and to give them practice in speaking English. Below are descriptions of the various activities I choose from.

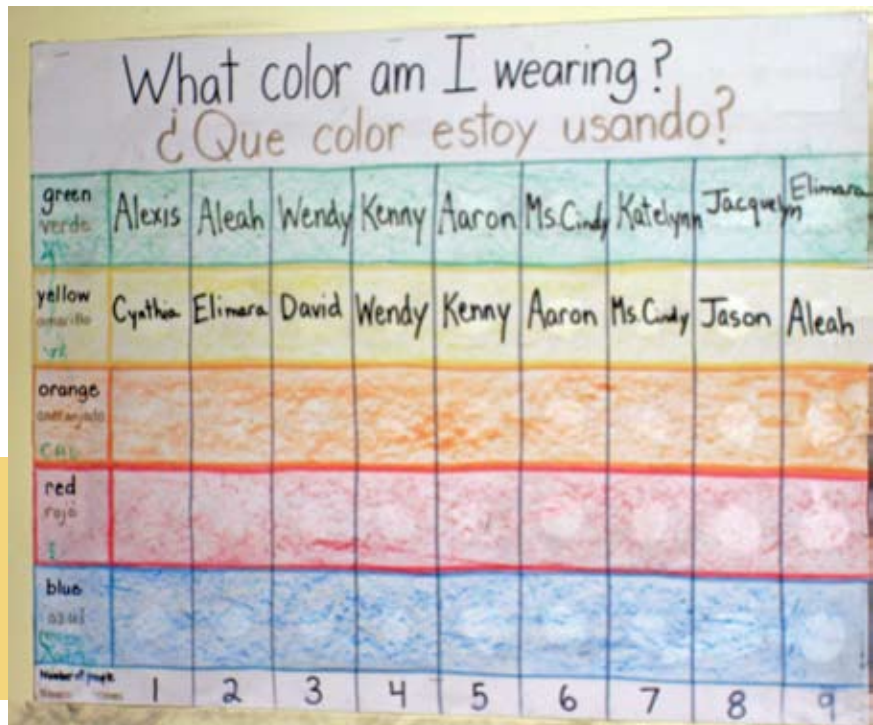
**The Color of the Day chart.** One morning meeting routine is to determine how many people in the class are wearing the color of the day. The teacher asks each child if he or she is wearing the color, records each name on a bar graph, and asks which child is next. This continues until everyone in the class has been asked. To scaffold language with children who are more proficient English speakers, I often ask more detailed questions:

- Do you have wide stripes or skinny stripes?
- What do the orange letters on your shirt say?
- Who has a shirt that looks similar to yours?

**The weather report.** Using small circles that show four weather conditions—sunny, cloudy, rainy, snowy—each day a child places the appropriate weather icon on the calendar. The weather report begins with a song:

English version	Spanish version
What’s the weather like today,	<i>¿Cómo está el tiempo hoy?</i>
Like today, like today?	<i>El tiempo hoy, el tiempo hoy?</i>
What’s the weather like today?	<i>¿Como está el tiempo hoy?</i>
Alexis will tell us.	<i>Alexis nos dirá.</i>

**The teacher asks each child if he or she is wearing the color, records each name on a bar graph, and asks which child is next.**





When Alexis selects the weather picture, he reports his findings using a complete sentence. With a child who is a dual language learner, I provide prompts, asking, "Is it cloudy?" as I point to the cloudy picture. When that child turns to face the class, I may whisper, "Today is cloudy," providing him with a model to imitate. Then the child places the weather icon on the weekly calendar. By the end of the week, the children initiate dialog about the number of sunny days we have had or whether they see a pattern. They report similar observations during color of the day charting. Relevant conversation is always encouraged. The children conclude the weather report by singing the song again, but changing the last line to "Today is cloudy."

**Bag buddy.** Finally, the moment we have all been waiting for arrives! It is time for the bag buddy to see what props are inside the shiny drawstring bag today. Before the bag buddy retrieves the objects, she looks at the weekly calendar, where I have written words and drawn corresponding stick figures to describe the objects in the bag. In the example that follows, Katelynn is new in the class. She is 3, and her home language is Spanish. Here is an excerpt of our interactions:

**Teacher:** *Primero, mira el calendario. ¿Tú qué piensas de mi bolsa?* [First, look at the calendar. What do you think is in my bag?]

Katelynn shrugs her shoulders.

**Teacher:** *Mira la foto.* [Look at the picture.] *¿Qué es esto?* [What is this?]

**Katelynn:** *Bloques.*

**Teacher:** *¿Si, y cómo se dice bloques en inglés?* [Yes, and how do you say blocks in English?]

Another student shouts out, "Blocks!" and Katelynn repeats, "Blocks."

**Props.** The props that the bag buddy pulls out of the silver bag each day support new vocabulary. They are a concrete way to introduce the children to words they will hear in a story or the day's message. The props correspond to words I have written on the calendar. I have gradually accumulated a large collection of little props that the children are free to use in other areas of the room, later in the day, such as small toys (dollhouse furniture, stuffed animals, puppets, books, and such), clip art mounted on craft sticks, and authentic objects—clothing, food, tools, nature items, and so on.



**Songs.** Songs and chants are a big part of the DLL classroom. We accumulate songs and chants rapidly and recall many of them as we go through transition periods each day. To introduce a new song, I write the words on sheets of chart paper in both Spanish (blue) and English (black) and I draw rebus-like pictures. These song sheets strengthen reading readiness skills in all children and the oversized visual is a way for me and Ms. Leti to remember a new song or chant. I often use *The Bilingual Book of Rhymes, Songs, Stories, and Fingerplays* (Schiller, Lara-Alecio, & Irby 2004) as a resource for Spanish songs. However, if I can't find a song to match up with our vocabulary words, I write a



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simple song myself. We store song sheets from earlier lessons in the teachers' music/prop cabinet, to be pulled out at anytime.

### Supporting home languages

When teaching culturally diverse children, the teacher must become familiar with each child's cultural background (Berger 2000). I ask parents how they celebrate holidays and birthdays and what types of activities the family enjoys in their spare time. When families travel to their homeland, I ask them to bring back an inexpensive musical instrument or other small artifact. Over time, our classroom has collected objects from many different countries, including instruments, traditional clothing, dolls, music CDs, woven baskets, and packaging from food items.

Teachers make an effort to support the home language of every dual language learner, even those who speak a language the teachers are not familiar with. In the Snowflakes' classroom, achieving that rich home language support is easier with the Spanish-speaking children than with the other dual language learners because Ms. Leti speaks fluent Spanish and is familiar with many cultural celebrations, foods, and songs. We sometimes struggle to find creative ways to support the home language of the Vietnamese children. Things we do include

- Forming partnerships with families.
- Labeling items in the classroom in three languages (black for English, blue for Spanish, green for Vietnamese) and including drawings.
- Seeking help from colleagues and families to translate parent newsletters and memos into Spanish and Vietnamese.
- Requesting a translator for formal parent-teacher conferences (I encourage parents to bring along a trusted friend or relative to help us communicate more effectively).

**Mealtimes.** We eat our meals family style. The teacher and the teaching assistant rotate among the three tables, encouraging conversation. To encourage the home language of the Vietnamese children, we arrange their seats so they can converse in Vietnamese, if they wish. Frequently, two of our Vietnamese students, brothers, bring in baggies of cultural treats to share. Today, Aaron and Jason shared litchi jellies. Every day I ask children if they are enjoying their food, modeling the correct way to ask a simple question and providing opportunities for children who have the least proficiency in English to answer successfully in English.

**When families travel to their homeland, I ask them to bring back an inexpensive musical instrument or other small artifact.**

### Conclusion

By the end of the day, each classroom member has had many opportunities to practice newly acquired language skills in a variety of interactions and situations. Our strategies are meant not only to encourage the individual development of English language acquisition but also to support the organizational goal of a more equitable system for dual language learners. By expanding vocabulary and strengthening oral communication skills, children can engage in meaningful conversations during role-playing, problem-solving, classification, and reasoning activities. Additionally, learning verbal ways to express their emotions, ideas, and desires supports children's social-emotional development.

We hope to leave you with the thought that there are concrete, basic ways in which you can support the child who has been sitting in your classroom for two months without speaking a word. Reaching that child and helping him develop to his full potential will only be achieved when every educator is empowered and accountable for what happens to that child.

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