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Enhancing Early Biliteracy for Dual Language Learners

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Effective biliteracy education for young dual language learners (DLLs) is an important equity concern both in California and across the nation. In California, over 60 percent of children under the age of five are DLLs – children who reside in homes where languages other than English are spoken. As public Transitional Kindergarten (TK) programs expand and a focus on early foundational literacy skills gains prominence, it is essential to prioritize research on early language and biliteracy development for young DLLs. This brief considers best practices for early biliteracy development in bilingual and non-bilingual settings and explores the limits of a narrowly tailored structured literacy approach for DLLs.

The Limits of a Narrowly Structured Approach

Increasingly, educators and policymakers recognize the significance of early learning in bridging achievement gaps and fostering long-term success. In California, this recognition has been spurred by the move to universal PreKindergarten (UPK) and expansion of TK programs, elevating the importance of educational continuity from preschool to third grade (P-3). However, while the aim of P-3 initiatives is to improve transitions and curriculum alignment between early childhood education (ECE) and early elementary grades, there is a risk of adopting narrowly tailored approaches to literacy that disregard the broader developmental needs of DLLs. Researchers such as Bassok, Latham, and Roren (2016) and Miller and Almon (2009) have found that current kindergarten classrooms already heavily emphasize direct instruction of isolated English literacy and math skills, leading to concerns about the potential replication of these practices in preschool programs.

Simultaneously, in early literacy instruction, there has been a noticeable shift from a 'whole language' to a more focused and structured approach, placing significant emphasis on teacher-guided instruction, particularly in the areas of phonemic awareness and phonics—the connection between letters and sounds. Legislative measures in California now mandate the inclusion of structured literacy reading instruction in teacher preparation programs along with the implementation of the overarching literacy themes in the ELA/ELD Framework by 2025. In addition, there is a new requirement for annual screening for reading difficulties and evidence-based literacy interventions for grades K-2. Proponents of these initiatives argue that a targeted emphasis on phonics and decoding skills will enhance all students' reading proficiency.

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In 2023, The Reading League and the National Committee on Effective Literacy issued a [joint statement](#) addressing the terms “science of reading” (SOR) in literacy education. The statement clarified that many practices labeled as “scientific” do not align with the evidence of how DLLs learn to read and it emphasized the need to integrate research and neuroscience of bilingualism and biliteracy into the conversation about reading instruction.

It is crucial to recognize that, in the past, narrowly structured approaches to reading and literacy showed limited effectiveness for all students including English learners (ELs) in grades K-5. Previous initiatives, such as Reading First, a federal reading program centered on narrow English assessments and mandated foundational skills literacy curricula, failed to effectively narrow reading gaps for ELs. It demonstrated no significant improvement in reading comprehension scores when students were assessed in grades 1-3 (Nov. 2008 Reading First Impact Study). The adoption of a narrowly structured literacy approach poses an even more significant risk for young DLLs, given the critical role that ECE plays in nurturing young children’s early language and biliteracy skills and supporting their healthy development and kindergarten readiness.

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Evidence-Based Early Biliteracy Instruction for Young Dual Language Learners

Effective early literacy instruction for DLLs requires tailored approaches that differ significantly from instruction for monolingual English proficient students and instruction for older peers. For DLLs, early literacy occurs within the presence and development of two (or more) languages. Starting from birth, DLLs organize concepts and connect new information to their existing knowledge through interactions and language experiences within their families and communities. Learning to read and write in a language other than the primary home language involves building upon the foundations of the first language (Grosjean, 1989). These implications have to be addressed and incorporated as defining elements of an effective model of early literacy instruction.

Research emphasizes the significance of a well-rounded instructional approach to early literacy in early childhood education that recognizes dual language development and cultural identities. This is achieved by affirming and utilizing the home language and establishing cross-language connections. To be effective, programs need to adopt a “planned language approach” or a “language model” that clearly articulates a program’s values, policies, and expected teaching practices within DLL communities. In ECE, two primary dual language instructional approaches exist: bilingual programs and English with home language support programs.

Bilingual programs aim to develop proficiency in two languages, typically English and the home language. These programs align curriculum and instruction across both languages and encourage families to engage in home-based literacy activities using the home language. Bilingual programs include dual language immersion, one-way and two-way developmental bilingual programs. While these programs differ in the instructional time dedicated to English language development (ELD) and home language development, research suggests dedicating a minimum of 50 percent of instructional time to the home language in the early grades (Barnett et al., 2007; Lindholm-Leary, 2014, 2016; Paez et al., 2007).

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Ideally, initial literacy instruction should occur in the child’s strongest language, where they have a solid oral language foundation and where text holds the most meaning. In situations where bilingual education teachers and staff are unavailable or where multiple languages are represented in the classroom, English with home language support programs can serve as a platform to support dual language development. These programs use English as the language of instruction to facilitate English acquisition, enhance comprehension and participation, and capitalize on children’s strengths in their home language while they learn English. In both bilingual and English with home language support programs, families are encouraged and supported in their efforts to engage their children in home literacy practices, providing opportunities to read, sing, speak, and write in their home language.

Components of a Comprehensive Approach to Early Biliteracy

The remarkable development of young children during their first six years of life lays the foundation for biliteracy. Creating preschool environments that support this development across all domains and for all children in culturally and linguistically inclusive and sustaining ways is a complex yet crucial endeavor. Central to fostering early biliteracy is recognizing the interconnectedness of reading, writing, speaking, and listening across various content areas. This involves planning relevant bilingual curricula, designing environments to foster engagement, inquiry, and hands-on learning in both languages, building respectful and caring relationships with children and families, and implementing and adapting differentiated bilingual instructional strategies to support a range of learning and developmental needs.

In 2022, the National Committee for Effective Literacy issued a report titled “[Early Literacy Development and Instruction for Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Education](#).” In the report, they outlined the ways in which instructional practices and professional development should encompass all aspects of early literacy development for DLLs, emphasizing culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy and oral language development. This section addresses some of the key elements highlighted in this publication.

Oral Language Development, Phonological Awareness, and Vocabulary Expansion

In preschool, a foundation is built for later biliteracy by focusing on the development of oral language. The languages children hear, both in their home language and English, play a crucial role in shaping their language and literacy/biliteracy abilities. Through hearing and producing language in the context of relationships and exploring and learning about the world, children build the vocabulary and internalize how languages are structured—essential precursors to reading and writing. The more expressive, complex, and precise the languages they are exposed to, the more developed their own language will become as they use it to meet their individual needs. Additionally, because reading involves decoding text sound by sound, it is important to help children develop phonological awareness—the ability to hear the sounds of a language.

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For DLLs, strong oral language skills in their home language serve as the foundation for biliteracy development. Dual language learners who have a solid base in their home language can transfer their skills to engage with reading mechanics and understand the sounds, words, and structures of other languages. Hence, a primary goal of early biliteracy instruction for DLLs should be to facilitate early oral language development, phonological awareness, and vocabulary expansion in the home language and in English. In practice, this involves:

- Providing scaffolded opportunities for ‘student talk’ (e.g. sentence starters, modeling, songs and chants).
- Playing with words by rhyming, singing, clapping, and chanting.
- Supporting rich oral language in both languages.
- Developing vocabulary in the language of instruction and in the home language.
- Selecting books, songs, and stories that use expressive language, precise word usage, and various language structures.

Drawing/Writing, Exposure to Books, and Early Attention to Print

Another part of becoming a reader is understanding the uses and purposes of text as well as the power of text to communicate, convey information, narrate, and entertain. Children become readers because they experience print as useful for their own objectives and books as beneficial and enjoyable. These factors enhance children’s motivation and engagement with books while fostering the development of their early literacy skills. This early interest in reading and language significantly influences later literacy development and academic success. Children with a genuine interest in reading are more likely to engage in literacy-related activities, improving their reading skills compared to those with lesser interest.

For DLLs, early exposure to books and print in their home language and English introduces children to the world of written language and cultivates a love for reading. Central to fostering this interest is recognizing the interconnectedness of reading, writing, speaking, and listening across various content areas. Biliteracy development involves empowering children in both productive and receptive language skills. Writing or drawing activities help children form tangible connections with language while books and read-aloud sessions further provide symbolic experiences, bridging the gap between spoken and written language and enhancing comprehension. Introducing books and basic print concepts, such as understanding how print works and recognizing letters and their symbols, also lays the groundwork for later decoding skills.

Biliteracy development involves empowering children in both productive and receptive language skills.

Beyond books, the quality of the learning environment influences engagement with print. Young children learn best when they can actively interact with their environment through play, interaction, and inquiry. A content, print-rich environment, with hands-on materials and visual aids, helps children understand and make sense of what they are learning. This is especially important for DLLs who rely on visual and tangible support to aid their understanding when learning in English. In the classroom, this looks like:

- Providing consistent access to and interaction with print (e.g., through read-alouds and class libraries).
- Encouraging children to dictate in both languages to watch their words being transformed into print.
- Modeling attention to print during read-alouds (e.g. finger underlining words, pointing out the cover, remarking on turning the page, etc.).
- Immersing students in a playful print environment with labels, signs, charts, and books.
- Selecting materials that are relevant and culturally inclusive/responsive, and foster a supportive climate that affirms and embraces home language, culture, and bilingualism.

Cross-Linguistic Awareness

Research shows that effective early biliteracy programs help DLLs develop both cross-linguistic awareness and proficiency in the specific language and literacy systems of their home language and other languages that they are exposed to (Soltero, 2016). Cross-linguistic awareness is the ability to recognize, understand, and manipulate linguistic structures across multiple languages. It includes understanding the similarities and differences between languages and how they function. In the early stages of biliteracy development, children often switch between two or more languages within a single conversation, a process known as translanguaging. This is a natural part of language learning. As DLLs advance, they gain a comparative understanding of their languages. The support children receive in developing this cross-linguistic awareness directly affects their ability to use both languages effectively and engage in literacy activities in each language.

Teachers who understand the languages spoken by learners can utilize strategies for cross-language connections that enhance literacy education. These connections are built through “in the moment” discoveries as well as by explicit instruction about linguistic transfer. Teachers that do not know the languages spoken by their students can be supported by tools and charts that help them build their knowledge about the connections between languages, so that they can more effectively support language transfer, and create learning environments that promote translanguaging. In the classroom, this looks like:

- Naming the differences and similarities between languages.
- Celebrating the development of two language systems.
- Reading bilingual children’s books that provide examples of translanguaging.

Policy Recommendations

Increased awareness of the unique factors supporting early literacy for DLLs can promote more inclusive approaches to biliteracy development in young children. Policymakers, program administrators, teachers, and researchers in early childhood have many opportunities, at the program and policy levels, to improve early biliteracy opportunities and to expand the knowledge base needed to develop more relevant services for DLLs. The subsequent recommendations aim to establish a supportive and effective framework to enhance early literacy outcomes for DLLs and all children.

Recommendation 1: Focus on Biliteracy and Support for Dual Language Programs

Given that California has identified biliteracy as a desired outcome of schooling for all students and has set specific goals through Global California 2030 to increase dual language programs, any new state literacy education legislation must align with this vision. Dual language learners should have access to biliteracy instruction and pedagogy, allowing them to learn in their home language and in English to work toward the goal of positive literacy outcomes in both languages.

Recommendation 2: Establish Precursor Skills as the Foundation for Early Biliteracy

As opposed to a narrow focus on foundational reading skills, early literacy programs should prioritize the evidence-based precursor skills necessary for biliteracy, such as fostering oral language development, encouraging active participation with books, and promoting writing through drawing and dictation in both languages. By focusing on these precursor skills, children can build a robust groundwork for their future biliteracy development as they progress into kindergarten and beyond.

Recommendation 3: Utilize Culturally Responsive Instructional Methods and Materials

In early childhood biliteracy development, it is crucial to utilize culturally responsive instructional methods and materials. These approaches validate students' cultural backgrounds and effectively link instruction to their wealth of knowledge, including skills, resources, language, and community-based wisdom. When teachers acknowledge and embrace students' home languages and cultures as valuable assets, they affirm their identities, which is key to fostering a sense of belonging and academic success. The state's early literacy agenda should prioritize the delivery of culturally relevant instruction. This entails, among other things, supporting teachers' ability to thoughtfully select and customize resources that resonate with the diverse backgrounds of learners, thereby promoting engagement and inclusivity within the learning environment.

Recommendation 4: Reinforce the Implementation of English Language Development

DLLs often exhibit a wide range of English proficiency. Some children may have little to no exposure to English and require assistance with basic interpersonal communication skills, while others may have more exposure and higher levels of fluency. California's English Language Development (ELD) preschool/TK learning foundations are specifically designed to be both integrated into content instruction and independently addressed in designated ELD instruction. By adopting this combined approach, educators can ensure that all DLLs receive appropriate and sufficient support in their English language development journey.

Recommendation 5: Adhere to Developmentally Appropriate Practice

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defines developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) as methods that nurture each child's optimal development and learning through a strengths-based, play-centered approach to joyful and engaging learning experiences (2020). This approach highlights the recognition that children come to the classroom with diverse strengths and underscores the vital role of educators in effectively acknowledging and responding to these differences. Thematic play-based instruction, a cornerstone of DAP, serves as a powerful tool to bridge connections between early literacy and content areas, enriching the learning experience and promoting deeper comprehension for all children. By prioritizing a joyful and engaging learning environment, DAP ensures that all children can progress at their own pace while they explore, discover, and thrive.

Conclusion

In California, there has been a significant shift toward recognizing the importance of early childhood education in building a high-quality P-12 education system. Yet, in these endeavors, the unique needs of DLL children are often overlooked. To establish an effective state agenda in early childhood literacy development, we must move beyond a narrow focus on developing isolated English skills in literacy instruction toward a comprehensive focus on the precursor skills and strategies that are crucial for comprehensive biliteracy development. Programs that adopt narrow instructional approaches neglect the fundamental principles of how young children learn and disregard the cultural and linguistic realities of DLLs, perpetuating deficit-framing and contributing to ongoing educational inequities. The potential benefits of culturally relevant, comprehensive, and developmentally appropriate early biliteracy instruction underscore the urgent need for policymakers, program administrators, teachers, and researchers in early childhood education to craft new frameworks, policies, and practices that prioritize DLLs. By doing so, we can establish a new standard for early biliteracy education and pave the way for the emergence of a truly bilingual and biliterate state.



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Californians Together, a coalition of education, civil rights, parent/caregiver, community, and advocacy organizations, champions the educational success of California's more than 1.1 million English learners. Californians Together serves as a trusted voice, source of expertise, and steadfast advocate standing for the educational rights of access for California's English learners, immigrants, and linguistically and culturally diverse students. We seek to overcome and transform the harms of systemic racial, language, and cultural inequality in education and to close opportunity gaps from early childhood through post-secondary education. The coalition exposes timely issues, advocates for cutting-edge policy and practice solutions grounded in research, and mobilizes to provide capacity-building support to multiple levels of the educational system.