

SECTION 4

Critical Issues for Preschool Migrant English Language Learners

Ensuring that children are ready for successful school experiences is one of the greatest challenges that MEP staff face when serving migrant pre-schoolers. Across cultures teachers and researchers agree that language development is central to the mission of pre-school. There is a belief that the earlier youngsters are exposed to second languages, the more easily they will acquire them. There is also a common belief that very young children are universally successful at picking up languages. Despite the pervasiveness of these beliefs, the literature offers no substantiation for it and to the contrary Hakuta (1986) states that “there is no single preferable period for second language acquisition.”

Critical Issues for Parents

Parents often have conflicting feelings about native language use at home and bilingual education. Many have suffered hardships to provide opportunities for their children. Being bilingual or having been an English language learner does not lead to a universal opinion and attitude toward the use of the native language for educational purposes. As Marcus and Ames (1998) state “when a school does not have a philosophy regarding the critical role that children’s first language play in their overall development, parents receive conflicting information and advice about using the first language with their children at home....Parents need(ed) to understand that use of the first language during early development provides the necessary cognitive foundation for later English development.” Important points to share with parents of pre-school migrant Spanish speaking children include:

1. Language is the primary tool for socializing children. To develop and preserve a family’s native language is critical to maintaining strong familial bonds. Research has documented a strong negative impact

on individuals and their families when learning a second language means losing the common home language. (Wong Fillmore, 1991.)

2. The more children learn in their first language the more they can transfer to a second language. (Cummins, 1989)
3. Older children who have developed strong native language skills are not at risk of losing their first language. It is the timing and conditions under which children come into contact with English that affects the retention and continued use of the home language. (Wong Fillmore, 1991.)
4. When adults attempt to communicate in a non-native language, over time they utilize less language than if they were using their native language, and have a higher probability of using incorrect language patterns which their children learn and replicate.
5. There are different types of bilingual education program models (see Critical Issues for School Age Children, page 20) all of which are designed to promote English language acquisition and literacy.

Critical Issues for Tutors/Outreach Workers

According to Kagan and Garcia, 1990, “...the optimal situation for supporting young children requires the caregiver’s language to match that of the child and the child’s family. Providing the native language in the caregiving (pre-school) situation supports and reinforces many rich encounters the child has with the language within the family. As children begin speaking, it is very important for them to be exposed, even “bathed” in rich and mutually supportive linguistic environments. Because language, intellectual, and social development are so closely linked, young children whose native language is

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present in the home, community, and early care settings will encounter more vocabulary, grammar, ideas, and concepts. This broad range of linguistic, social, and cognitive experiences in natural situations enriches the development of language and intellectual function.”

What happens when the tutor/outreach worker is not fluent in the home languages of the families that they serve? The best approach to respond to a language mismatch is to recognize that it exists. A bilingual staff person or parent can facilitate the trust building phase between a monolingual staff person and a preschooler and his or her family.

Guidelines to follow include:

1. **Be sensitive to both verbal and non-verbal communication.** Over 60% of any communicative act is non-verbal. Respond to all of the child’s communicative signals and with a willingness to make all communication meaningful.
2. **Include recognition and consideration of home values, cultures, and languages.** Cultural differences in parents’ beliefs and practices may affect children’s adjustment to early childhood services. “...When there is a lack of congruence between parents’ and teachers’ expectations, children may have the additional burden of determining the implicit rules and expectation that govern the early childhood classroom/settings” (Okagaki and Diamond, 2000.)
3. **Support child’s cognitive development.** Uninterrupted language development is critical to uninterrupted cognitive development. Hakuta, 1986 found that “all things being equal, higher degrees of bilingualism are associated with higher levels of cognitive attainment.”

The Bilingualism Continuum

Bilingualism refers to a continuum of language skills in two languages. The following are a few of the critical points along the continuum:

- **Additive bilingualism** – The addition of a second language without the loss or competence in the first language. This occurs when learning a second language does not interfere with learning the first language.
- **Balanced bilingualism** – Additive bilingualism can lead to balanced bilingualism. The individual has listening, speaking, reading and writing competencies in both languages.
- **Subtractive bilingualism** – Commonly found in children, subtractive bilingualism occurs when the addition of a second language interferes with the learning of the first language and the individual become dominant in the second language.

Research affirms the value of additive childhood bilingualism and the negative impact of subtractive childhood bilingualism.