

The logo for the Education Development Center (EDC), consisting of the letters 'EDC' in a bold, sans-serif font inside a white square.

Education
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Supporting Emergent Bilingual Children in Early Learning

PROMISING
PRACTICES and
CHECKLIST

Promising Practices

More than ever, early learning settings are serving children who are growing up with more than one language in home and at school (known as emergent bilinguals, or dual language learners). We reviewed current research to find the most promising practices for supporting emergent bilinguals in your classroom, whether you are a new teacher or a veteran, whether you have one or many emergent bilingual children, whether or not you are using a dual-language model, and whether or not you speak the home language of the children in your classroom. We found three main areas of focus for helping these children thrive in your classroom and for laying the foundation for success in speaking multiple languages in later grades:

- 1 Supporting children's use of their home languages**
- 2 Valuing children's home cultures**
- 3 Using specific teaching strategies to help children be successful**

We recommend you review these tips, picking the ones most useful for you and your children. You also can review this document in collaboration with other teachers in your classroom, center or school.



1

Support the Home Language

When teachers demonstrate a positive attitude towards a child's home language and culture this can have a strong positive impact on that child's chances for success in school. To learn about your children's home languages, you can **interview the families about their language use or send home a questionnaire.** Learning about the children's home languages allows you to choose the best teaching strategies for your children. One way to support the home language is to strategically **encourage children to use their home languages in the classroom;** otherwise, children may get the impression that their home languages are less valuable than English. To help children learn English and maintain their home languages, you can **pre-read bilingual books in small groups** before you read them with the whole class. If you speak the children's home language, you can pre-read the books in that language. If you do not speak the children's home languages, during small-group reading you can still point out key vocabulary words in English and use pictures and gestures to reinforce their meaning so that children can learn new words and follow along with the book more easily when you read it to the whole class. You also can **invite family volunteers, school staff, or community members into your classroom** to read, sing songs, help write labels for classroom materials in the home language, or engage in other cultural activities in those languages.





Another way to promote children’s home language, if you don’t speak it, is to **learn important phrases or “survival words”** in your children’s home languages. Also, to help children make connections between English and their home language, you can learn about cognates (words in two languages that sound similar and have similar meanings) and teach targeted cognates to children. For example, before reading a story about animals, you might review English-Spanish cognates such as “elephant-elefante.” About 40 percent of English words have a Spanish cognate.



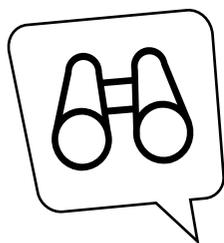
elephant-elefante

Although the home language can be a great instructional support, it has to be used strategically. The **teachers in your classroom should use only one language per activity** (unless you’re teaching cognates). Otherwise, children will tune in only to the language they know. Don’t try to translate words during a read-aloud. Rather, use the pre-teaching strategies above, such as pre-reading in the home language or doing a separate activity on cognates, or use gestures and pictures to help children comprehend. Although teachers should only use one language per activity, children can respond in whatever language is most comfortable for them.

2

Support the Home Culture

You can meet the needs of the young children in your classroom who come from a range of cultural backgrounds, including those that might differ from yours, by using “culturally responsive teaching.” This means that you tailor your teaching to the children’s home cultures, just as you might tailor it to their abilities and interests. One way to be a culturally responsive teacher is to **find out about the**



cultures of the families and children in your class and **include them in your children’s learning experiences.** This will help families and children feel valued and will support children’s learning by helping them make connections. For example, many cultures value sharing stories and lessons verbally rather than in writing. You might use traditional songs and stories to teach new material to children

in ways that are familiar to them and promote early literacy skills. **Your children’s home languages and cultures can be resources that will support and enrich the classroom learning experience.**

You also can **incorporate books, pictures, stories, music, and toys that involve a variety of cultures**, especially those represented by the children in your class. Your curriculum can include thematic units that are culturally relevant, with topics that are familiar to the children, such as holidays, stories, and foods. Families and other community members can help you choose themes, activities, and materials to use.

3

Use Teaching Strategies that Promote Language Development

Vocabulary Strategies

Reading aloud is one useful method for supporting vocabulary development.

When reading aloud, it is a good idea to emphasize a few essential words that tie into a unit or a rotating classroom theme. These words can be presented in many ways, such as in pictures and gestures, and also can be taught in small groups for maximum learning. After reading a book, you can encourage children to **make connections between the story and their own experiences, while being mindful that they may not always be able to relate to the experiences in every children's book.** Some children may never have been to a farm or a city, a beach or a subway. When reading a book, you can ask children if they have had similar experiences in school or at home. Books offer an opportunity to help children expand their background knowledge, either by linking a story to a child's own experience or by exposing children to something that is new and different. You also build children's background knowledge by taking children on field trips or short walks around the neighborhood, or by introducing pictures or videos of new places or experiences, to help make real-life connections to information they see and hear about in books or on a screen.



To help children remember and understand new vocabulary, **use new words multiple times in different meaningful contexts**, such as practicing the vocabulary words while reading stories and during play. Other methods of promoting vocabulary development include **teacher narration** and **open-**



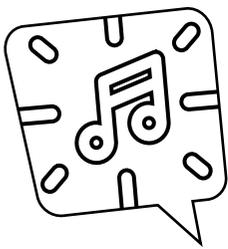
ended questioning. While closed-ended questions, such as “What color is the hat?” usually call for a short, factual answer, **open-ended questions** such as “Why do you think he shared the toy with his friend?” invite longer and more creative responses. Such questions encourage children to talk more.

Teacher narration describes aloud what the child is doing, using words and sentences the child can understand. For example, during block play, you might say, “I noticed that you stacked two long blocks on top of each other. What do you plan to do next?” Teacher narration helps children understand and later produce longer sentences and use new vocabulary words. These strategies can provide opportunities to teach language learning in everything children do.



Instructional Adjustments

Adjust your teaching practices for children who are emergent bilinguals, depending on their English proficiency. You can **use visual images**, including photos, graphics, and illustrations, as well as **gestures or movements**, to help children understand what you're saying. **One-on-one and small-group instruction** are most beneficial for young children, especially emergent bilingual children. Emergent bilingual children might have trouble following and participating in a whole-class conversation.



Another successful method of developing language skills is through **songs and rhymes**. Singing songs repeatedly allows young children to learn the sounds of language and to remember new words and grammar. Repeating familiar words in songs and rhymes also lets children feel more confident in their language abilities. You can **incorporate songs in English as well as the home language** into your week. This allows children to learn about different cultures and languages while supporting their English language learning.

Hands-On Learning

Using a hands-on learning approach is also important for young children and language learners, and it can be carried out through play-based activities such as dramatic play, games, and story reenactment. These activities will help your children improve their language and social skills. **Grouping children of mixed English levels** is another effective strategy to help children learn language from each other. For this strategy, your role is to mediate the groups to ensure all children are participating, regardless of how proficient they are in English.

Help new children feel more comfortable in your classroom by **assigning them a buddy who speaks the same language** and giving them extra attention and care when possible. This can boost a child's ability to navigate a new language and culture, reduce stress, and lead to better language learning, since language learning is inhibited by stress. Don't be alarmed if children go through a silent period as they adjust to hearing a new language before they start speaking it themselves, or if they switch back and forth between two languages. These are all normal for the language development process!



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Where to Learn More

» Here are some resources about supporting children's home language:

Gathering and Using Language Information that Families Share

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/gathering-using-language-info-families-share.pdf>

The Home Language: An English Language Learner's Most Valuable Resource

<http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/home-language-english-language-learners-most-valuable-resource>

Including Children's Home Languages and Cultures

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/dll-childrens-home-languages.pdf>

» Following are strategies for supporting emergent bilinguals:

Supporting English Language Development When Children Have Little Experience With English

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/dll-english-language-development.pdf>

How to Use Bilingual Books

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/how-to-use-bilingual-books.pdf>

Using Cognates to Develop Comprehension in English

<http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/using-cognates-develop-comprehension-english>

» Printable copies of this and other early learning resources are available in Chinese, Spanish, and English:

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