A Promising Approach for Dual Language Learners

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Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education as we know it across all age spans. As a result, young dual language learners (DLLs), many of whom were disproportionately left out of care and learning during the pandemic (Quick et al., 2020), are returning to early learning programs and classrooms. Now more than ever, it is critical that teachers are well equipped with the necessary training and materials to serve DLLs and their families. Unfortunately, with no federal or statewide certification requirements for working with DLLs, many teachers have generally felt unprepared to support DLLs (Brodziak de los Reyes et al., 2020). Thus, providing teachers with adequate training and high-quality materials is of utmost importance to ensuring the success of our State's DLLs during the pandemic and beyond. A new curriculum, *Cultivating Oral Language and Literacy Talent in Students* (COLLTS), offers a promising approach to building students' language and literacy in both English and Spanish. This research-based curriculum can help prepare teachers to engage in exciting and effective ways to develop young DLLs' foundational knowledge, oral language, early literacy, and bilingualism.

Study Overview and Findings

A recent research study of a program for young dual language learners offers insights about the potential to improve children's outcomes by providing teachers training and classroom materials in evidence-based practices. The study took place with 3-year-old Spanish-speaking children in Head Start classrooms in a large urban area of the south-central United States. Twelve treatment teachers in unique classrooms (60 children) participated in professional development to implement the COLLTS program in their classrooms. The COLLTS program includes a focus on strategies to support oral language, foundational reading skills, and conceptual knowledge through interactive reading of high-quality children's literature. Ten control classroom teachers (58 children) were asked to read the same books in the way that they normally conducted read-alouds in the classroom.

Children's oral language was assessed using a story retell prompt before and after the intervention. Children's responses were transcribed and analyzed using Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts. The results showed that children from classrooms that participated in COLLTS made significantly greater gains in the total number of utterances, the number of different words, and the number of total words compared with children in similar classrooms (who were not using COLLTS). These oral language outcomes are all positively related to bilingual reading achievement of DLLs in the early years and into elementary school (Miller et al., 2006). Findings from this study highlight the potential of an evidence-based intervention focused on high-quality language input

and intentional and scaffolded language practices to improve the oral language of young DLLs.

Implications of Study Findings

The practices and findings from COLLTS for developing DLLs' oral language have several implications for early learning and care administrators and teachers in the current COVID-19 pandemic recovery efforts. After over a year and a half of turbulence and disruptions, early learning and care teachers will play an important role in helping young DLLs adjust to in-person early learning experiences and ensure they use such experiences to develop language and literacy. As early learning and care teachers return to in-person instruction with DLLs, we highlight some key strategies from the COLLTS curriculum that can be implemented in the classroom. The following strategies will be critical for teachers to implement in helping DLLs establish a strong foundation in language and literacy to develop the skills they need to achieve their full linguistic and academic potential.

Support Teachers With High-Quality Materials That Promote Evidence-Based Practices

As children return to early learning programs, teachers will need to assess their development and provide opportunities for targeted and accelerated learning. Identifying training opportunities for teachers and selecting curricular materials that focus on foundational skills and high-leverage practices will help optimize the time spent with young learners. The COLLTS program was specifically designed using the evidence-based practices from the What Works Clearinghouse practice guide[1] (Baker et al., 2014) and guided by the Common Core State Standards for Kindergarten.[2] COLLTS materials offer teachers actionable tools, resources, and ideas for implementing evidence-based practices related to vocabulary, oral language, early literacy, and concept development. Exhibit 1 displays a picture card to support the evidence-based practices for developing vocabulary.

Given the range in knowledge and experience of teachers in working with DLLs, it is important to choose curricular materials based on using what we know works for supporting DLLs. When teachers engage with the evidence-based practices in the curricular materials, they become more familiar and comfortable with using and integrating these practices throughout their instruction.

Emphasize and Foster Oral Language for Young DLLs

Given the disruptions and variation in learning experiences for young children, early learning teachers will need to prioritize time with students on high-leverage practices. In addition to the previous example for developing vocabulary, COLLTS also incorporates strategies and practices to foster oral language. Research shows that oral language and literacy development are closely related for children of all language backgrounds, including multilingual children (Lonigan et al., 2018). In the COLLTS program, shared interactive reading activities provide children with opportunities to develop new vocabulary, build reading comprehension skills, and practice concept development. Interactive reading goes beyond just the teacher simply reading aloud to children and involves active engagement, critical thinking, and turn-taking between the teacher and children.

As the teacher reads the text, the teacher engages with children and promotes oral language development by modeling, asking questions, and responding to children's language. Modeling involves actively sharing reading and comprehension strategies with children, such as identifying and describing text features, making connections with the text, and defining new words in context. The teacher also uses questions about the story and pictures to encourage high-quality discussion. Finally, teachers scaffold children's language by responding in ways that support children's language, including recasts and expansions. The COLLTS curriculum provides explicit guidance to

Exhibit 1. Vocabulary cards

Vocabulary cards guide teachers in teaching vocabulary through multiple modalities and contexts, including using visuals, sharing a child-friendly definition, providing the translation in Spanish, repeating the word chorally, giving an example of the word in context, and providing opportunities for peer talk using the word.

teachers and families on how to engage in these types of language-building activities, as seen in Exhibit 2 from the teacher's guide.

Exhibit 2. Expansions

Expansions involve taking children's language and rephrasing their comments using more specific or complete sentences. In the example here, the teacher language is in the middle column and anticipated child responses are in the right-hand column. For the final question, children may respond with one- or two-word answers. The teacher can use the anticipated response as a model to repeat back to children as a model for the complete statement.

Encourage and Leverage Home Language for Language and Literacy Development

Because children spent increased amounts of time at home during the pandemic, many have had increased exposure to their home language and literacy practices. Research concludes that children have the capacity to learn more than one language, and the early years are an optimal time for developing bilingualism (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). Children can reap the cognitive, social, and academic benefits of bilingualism; in fact, a strong foundation in the home language can facilitate language and literacy development in English. As children return to the classroom, teachers can find ways to intentionally uplift and leverage the home language and literacy practices of DLLs. Examples of ways COLLTS leverages home language include activities for engaging with children, both within the classroom and at home. In the classroom, teachers can leverage

home language and literacy through explicit attention to cognates, providing translations of key vocabulary in the home language, and encouraging peer talk in the home language. Family literacy activities (such as Exhibit 3) offer an opportunity at home for families to reinforce concepts and encourage language and interaction about a topic that is being addressed in their child's classroom.

Exhibit 3. Family literacy activities

Family literacy activities encourage families to engage in everyday activities related to the class content and then encourage development of their home language through interactions (speaking, listening, reading, writing) about the topic.

Summary

Supporting young DLLs through pandemic recovery will require targeted instruction that scaffolds and models language and literacy practices. Teachers of DLLs can use high-quality curricular materials that intentionally incorporate evidence-based practices to develop children's oral language and leverage and build on their home language strengths. COLLTS, an example of a curricular approach with promising findings, can offer teachers support for using evidence-based practices for developing DLLs' language and literacy. ∞