

Benefits of Bilingualism/Multilingualism

by Linda M. Espinosa

A dramatic population shift has occurred throughout our early childhood and K-12 programs. Young children who speak a language other than English in the home and are acquiring English during the preschool years (dual language learners, DLLs)¹, are the fastest growing child population in the United States.² Many of these children are exposed to more than one language in the home and can be considered emergent multilinguals. The rate of growth of DLLs in the Early Care and Education (ECE) systems as well as the public schools continues to exceed projections with 10 states experiencing more than 200% growth from 1990-2010.³ Fortunately, our scientific understanding of both the process of second language acquisition and the consequences of becoming bilingual during this critical period of development have also grown dramatically.

Young dual language learners represent multiple language groups, diverse cultural backgrounds, a wide range of family circumstances, and many different countries of origin. This group of children and families is very diverse. However, they share a common trait; they all are learning at least two or more distinct linguistic systems during a period of rapid cognitive, conceptual, and language development. Mastering the fundamentals of one language system during the preschool years is a major developmental accomplishment —

progressing in two or more is monumental — but achievable and beneficial!

What Do We Know about Multilingualism and Young Children?

Most young children throughout the world successfully learn more than one language beginning in their earliest years. Recent research from developmental cognitive neuroscientists and psycholinguists on the processes and consequences of learning two languages underscores the extensive capacity of the human brain to learn multiple languages during the early childhood years; during the first months of life babies are able to sort the sounds of each language into separate categories and by the preschool years, bilinguals can interpret contextual cues to know when it is appropriate to use which language with whom. Many cognitive neuroscientists have concluded that the human brain is primed to learn language from birth and is actually hearing and processing the unique characteristics of different languages beginning in the last trimester of pregnancy.

There is wide scientific consensus that bilingual infants develop two separate but connected linguistic systems during the first year of life. We now know that infants have the innate capacity to learn two or more languages from



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1. The office of Head Start and most states define DLLs as: *dual language learners are young children learning two or more languages at the same time, as well as those learning a second language while continuing to develop their first (or home) language*.
2. United States Census Bureau, (2010). www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/012496.html.
3. National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness (NCCLR). Dual language learners in state early learning guidelines and standards. (2012). Available online at http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/cultural-linguistic/center/state-guidelines/dll_guidelines.html

birth and that if the early multiple language exposure is sufficient in quantity and quality, young children can successfully become fully proficient in multiple languages. Some language researchers have described young children as *linguistic geniuses* who are more capable language learners than adults.

We now know that infants have the innate capacity to learn two or more languages from birth and that if the early multiple language exposure is sufficient in quantity and quality, young children can successfully become fully proficient in multiple languages.

These bilingual benefits have been found across cultural and socio-economic groups, as well as across different language combinations. However, these cognitive advantages have been tied to the extent the child is bilingual; those who are more balanced in their bilingualism show larger advantages than children who are more strongly dominant in

Benefits of Multilingualism

Current scientific research suggests that the development of two languages from a child's earliest language exposure has specific impacts on a variety of cognitive abilities that are discernible as early as seven months of age. These enhanced cognitive and linguistic abilities are persistent throughout childhood and may even offer some protection from symptoms of Alzheimer's in adulthood. In addition, advanced social-emotional skills, such as executive function abilities (e.g., working memory, inhibitory control, attention to relevant vs. irrelevant task cues), as well as improved language skills, have been linked to early bilingualism. These social-emotional skills have been portrayed as the biological foundation for school readiness, providing the platform upon which children's capacities to learn educational content is based. Studies have found a bilingual advantage when comparing monolinguals and bilinguals on tasks:

- requiring selective attention, cognitive flexibility, and certain literacy skills, such as decoding when the two languages have similar writing systems. Notably, these advantages have been found across all socio-economic, racial, and ethnic groups.
- involving infants' ability to perceive and respond to a switch in learning conditions, which indicates very young bilinguals' advanced ability to inhibit previous learning when the task demands change. This is an aspect of increased cognitive flexibility.
- relating to bilinguals' enhanced attention during speech processing, which allows them to detect and process specific features of each language spoken.
- relating to executive function skills.
- selectively attending to competing options and the ability to suppress interfering information.

one language. Thus, it is important for early childhood educators to be very intentional about the amount of exposure and frequency of experiences in each language.

We also now know that learning more than one language during the early childhood years does not delay the acquisition of English or impede academic achievement in English when all languages are supported.

Young children can successfully learn two languages, and do not need to give up their home language in order to learn English if it is the formal language of the preschool setting. Practitioners can enhance the language learning of dual language learners by providing rich learning opportunities in each language. For example, they may support the home language at the same time as the school language through family involvement, bilingual materials, and activities and interactions in the home language with teachers, staff, and peers who speak that language.⁴

There are additional benefits to knowing two (or more) languages and encouraging children to maintain and develop their home language(s) as they learn English during the preschool years. Children who know more than one language have personal, social, cognitive, and economic advantages throughout their lives. Young dual language learners who do not continue to develop and maintain proficiency in their home language may lose their ability to communicate with parents and family members. Dual language learners who are proficient in their home language are able "to establish a strong cultural identity, to develop and sustain strong ties with their immediate and extended families, and thrive in a global multilingual world."⁵

4. Conboy, B. (2013). *Neuroscience research: How experience with one or more languages affects the developing brain*. Commissioned research paper by the California Department of Education.
5. Espinosa, L. M. (2006, Fall). Young English language learners in the U.S. *PAT (Parents as Teachers) News*.

Thus, the most current research on children who learn more than one language during the early childhood years has also shown that young children are capable of *adding* a second or third language and that this multilingual ability confers long-term cognitive, cultural, and economic advantages. The early childhood years are critical years for developing mastery of the sounds, structure, and functions of language and thus an ideal time to expose children to the benefits of two or more languages. Current research has clearly indicated that young dual language learners should be given opportunities to develop high levels of proficiency in both of their languages because the advantages are significant and lasting.

Differences Between Dual Language Learners and Monolinguals

There are important differences in the language development of young DLLs that may look like delays to the untrained eye. From the first weeks of life, young multilingual children develop more widely dispersed and evenly distributed neural pathways across both brain hemispheres. The unique linguistic challenges faced by young DLLs leads to different sets of skills than those of monolinguals. The cognitive demands of processing input in two or more languages may lead to slower word retrieval in each language, but enhanced abilities in other areas as described above. While it may take DLLs longer to respond to language tasks that require word retrieval, and they may not know as many words in each language, the additional cognitive challenges of switching between languages is also associated with advantages in some areas of development. In short, all language experiences influence cognitive and linguistic learning processes and since DLLs are developing unique neural connections and pathways, their brain development and learning will look different from monolingual children.

While language *differences* have been reported in studies of young DLLs, these differences should not be interpreted as language delays due to learning in more than one language. Most often, these differences are evident only in certain areas of language development (e.g., vocabulary and rapid word retrieval), but other areas (e.g., phonological awareness and decoding skills), bilinguals and monolinguals most often are comparable. It is also important to note that learning expectations or state standards developed for monolingual English speakers may not be appropriate for DLLs.

Finally, there are important socio-cultural differences, both between DLLs and non-DLLs and within the DLL population,

that affect the development of important language and literacy skills. For example, young DLLs are much more likely than native English speakers to have parents without a high school education, to live in low-income families, and to be raised in cultural contexts that do not reflect mainstream norms in the United States. The language and early literacy development of DLLs also follows unique trajectories toward full English proficiency with significant implications for instructional planning. These background and developmental characteristics of young DLLs need to be understood when making instructional decisions and judgments about individual children's progress.

In summary, recent research on the development of young children who are growing up with more than one language has concluded:

- All young children are capable of successfully learning more than one language. The human brain starts to identify and process the sounds of language during the third trimester of pregnancy.
- Bilingualism/multilingualism confers many cognitive and social advantages for children and adults. These advantages are strongest when children demonstrated a balanced bilingualism and were roughly equally proficient in both languages. To date, comparable studies on the impacts of three or more languages have not been published.
- Learning more than one language during the early childhood years does not delay the acquisition of English or impede academic achievement in English when both languages are supported.
- Systematic, deliberate exposure to English during early childhood, combined with ongoing opportunities for DLLs to learn important concepts in the home language, results in high achievement in both the home language and English by the end of third grade and beyond.
- At all levels (local, state, and federal), educators need to review their early learning standards, assessment tools, and expectations to ensure they are appropriate for DLLs.
- As a field, early childhood educators need to familiarize themselves with the developmental features of dual language development, as well as the important educational supports necessary to the growth, development, and achievement of a large and growing group of children.