What Parents Have to Teach Us About Their Dual Language Children

My children, 5-year-old Marie and 4-year-old Marc, speak English to each other. I think it’s because they speak it at school. At home we speak Italian and sometimes Spanish. My husband speaks only Spanish to the children and makes them answer him in Spanish. We don’t want to lose that connection or they won’t be able to talk to their grandparents or cousins.

—Ana, Mother

Marie and Marc are typical of the 20 percent of children in America under the age of 5 who live in a household in which no one over age 13 speaks English as their first language (US Census Bureau 2013). Many young children come to child care, preschool, and kindergarten programs as English language learners or as dual language learners (DLLs) (USDOE 2015). Although the population of multilingual children has increased...
in US schools, teacher education programs and early childhood curriculums spend little time discussing the role that bilingualism plays in language, literacy, cognitive, and social and emotional development (Michael-Luna & Heimer 2012). Many early childhood educators have questions about DLLs’ language development and the home language’s role in their learning English at school. Yet, teachers often do not consult with the very people who can answer these questions—the families.

Although the language development of children who are dual language-learners is similar to that of children who are monolingual, they do not fully coincide (De Houwer 2009). DLL’s vocabulary and language use depends on the experiences they live in each language and how different members of their family use language (King & Mackey 2007; Baker 2011). For example, a child bilingual in Italian and English might go to the zoo and read animal books with his Italian-speaking mother, but visit the seashore with his English-speaking grandparents. Although the child has experienced both the zoo and the seashore, the child’s ability to express his seashore visit in Italian may be limited by his lack of “seashore” vocabulary in that language. Teachers often ask children to talk about their experiences, such as a weekend visit to the zoo or seashore, as a part of the morning meeting. For DLLs, the knowledge and experiences are in their minds, but the language to share them with English-dominant teachers or peers may not be available. This makes sharing time a challenge for DLLs and teachers.

The home language environment has a foundational influence on a young child’s oral language development (King & Mackey 2007; Bohman et al. 2010). A DLL’s family language influences how the DLL expresses or understands a given language. For example, in one kindergarten class, Sunghee has monolingual Korean-speaking parents and an older brother and sister who speak English to her. Yi-Chin has monolingual Mandarin-speaking parents and no siblings. Each family presents a distinct language environment that calls for different types of supportive pedagogies, curriculums, assessments, and home–school connections. Because early childhood programs are required to meet English language and literacy goals (Copple & Bredekamp 2009), teachers need extensive information about home language environments. Without parent insight into family language use, teachers end up seeing a language puzzle with missing pieces.

**Asking the experts—parents and families**

This article provides guidance for collecting and understanding parent knowledge about their children who are dual language learners to enhance classroom practice. The findings were from parent and teacher surveys and interviews that were part of a 24-month ethnographic case study. The 39 linguistically diverse families participating in this study sent their children (ages 2.8 years to 6.3 years) to a dual language preschool. In this article, four areas of parent knowledge that aid teacher effectiveness in supporting DLLs in an early childhood setting are addressed:

- **Home language context:** Who speaks what language to whom and when
- **Family language and behavior observations:** What families hear and see at home
- **Language and literacy practices in the home**
- **Family concerns, assumptions, and questions about language learning**

Each of these four areas of parent knowledge is examined, followed by discussion that includes questions asked to parents; a sample parent answer; analysis of the answer; and ways classroom practice changed as a result. Finally, different methods for collecting information from parents and families in the classroom are described.

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**Home language context**

**Question to parents: “What languages do you speak in your home?”**

Susan, the mother of 3-year-old Emma and 5-year-old Leo, answered,

We have a lot of languages in our home. [My husband] Daniel speaks Italian and English. I understand Italian, but I don’t speak it well. I speak English to the children. We did that right from the start. Our babysitter speaks Spanish. At the dinner table Daniel speaks Italian. I speak English, and the children talk in the language of the parent they are talking to. I guess it sounds pretty confusing to someone listening, but [the children] get it. Sometimes when they don’t have the word in one language, they use the other because everyone listening understands English and Italian.

Susan’s family speaks two languages at home, and with the help of the babysitter, they’ve added a third. Susan

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**About the Author**

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