



English Language Learners

Head Start's Ninth National Research Conference, Creating Connections: Linking Policy, Practice, and Research across Early Childhood Development, Care, and Education occurred in June 2008 in Washington, DC. This biannual conference brings together practitioners, researchers, administrators, and policymakers involved in Head Start, early childhood, childcare, and health care to share research that promotes positive development in young children. Through the conference's varied presentations, roundtable discussions, and posters, attendees learned about new research and how it can be effectively transformed into practical applications. English Language Learners was one key topic of the conference. All researchers who presented papers or posters related to this topic were invited to submit their presentations for inclusion in this summary sheet; all presentations received were included.

Head Start programs are experiencing steady increases in the number of enrolled families and children whose home languages are other than English. About 29 percent of the Head Start children nationwide speak a language other than English in the home.¹ The Head Start Program Performance Standards (<http://www.headstartinfo.org/pdf/Bulletin78.pdf>) require that classroom environments be structured to support each child's cultural pride and home languages. Researchers at the ninth Head Start Research Conference (HSNRC) reported on various methods to facilitate bilingual language development by dual language learners. Areas of research explored included the pathways that young second-language learners take to understand and use their newly developed languages; activities that early childhood educators can incorporate into their classrooms to support these students and their families; cohort results of the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES; 1997, 2000, 2003); effects of professional development on teaching practices related to language and literacy learning; and the styles and effects of shared bookreading in dual language learner families. Also, several studies explored the relationship between oral language use, phonological awareness and language development for both English and Spanish.

Highlights from the conference and poster sessions are outlined below. Summaries of the conference sessions and poster descriptions relevant to the dual language learner topic follow the highlights. This research offered extensive information to practitioners and policy makers working to address the needs of English language learners and their families.

Highlights on English Language Learners: Key Points Presented at Head Start's Ninth National Research Conference

- A study conducted by Dr. Dina C. Castro found that among the benefits to the development of both a child's first language and English are pride in cultural heritage, a transfer of language skills from the first to second language, and continued communication between parents and children. Language development ([The Nuestros Niños Early Language and Literacy Program: A Teacher Quality Improvement Intervention](#))

- Dr. Yair Ziv presented findings from three cohorts of the Head Start the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES 1997, 2000, 2003). Head Start parents of dual language learners are more likely than parents of single language learners to be involved in community and church activities with their children. They are less likely, however, to be involved in educational activities such as reading with their children, and less likely to have restrictive rules about behaviors in the home. ([Characteristics of Dual Language Learners and their Families in Head Start](#))
- Children developing dual language skills live in homes that offer varying proportions of English and Spanish use. Dr. Carol Scheffner Hammer and colleagues conducted the Longitudinal Study of Bilingual Preschoolers, observing families over time. The use of English by parents and siblings in the home of a preschooler learning dual languages did not, in general, impact the child's English-emergent literacy or vocabulary; however, it did appear to slow Spanish language growth. Conversely, the use of Spanish in the home did not impact children's English vocabulary but appeared to promote Spanish vocabulary development. (["They're Following Me": Findings from a Longitudinal Study of Bilingual Preschoolers' Language and Literacy Development](#))
- Dr. Dina C. Castro's investigation of the Nuestros Niños project found that within the project, specialized professional development teaching practices related to language and literacy learning resulted in greater Spanish and English phonological awareness in dual language learner children. ([The Nuestros Niños Early Language and Literacy Program: A Teacher Quality Improvement Intervention](#))

Special Sessions

This section includes poster symposia and paper symposia related to the topic of English Language Learners.

PAPER SYMPOSIUM: The Changing Faces of Dual Language Learners in Head Start: Findings from Three Cohorts of the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey

Discussants: Michael Lopez, Sharon Yandian

PAPER One: Cognitive and Social Emotional Development Outcomes of Dual Language Learners in Head Start (FACES Data)

Author and Presenter: Alberto Sorongon, Westat

Progress for dual language learners (DLL) can be measured in multiple domains, including vocabulary, early reading, early writing, early math skills, and social skills during the Head Start program year. The results from such assessments vary, depending on whether English or Spanish is used for assessments over time. A range of other factors could influence these bilingual development paths, including family, classroom, and/or program factors. Results from FACES 2003 show that the English proficiency skills of DLL improved over the course of the Head Start program year. DLL who had sufficient English proficiency for assessment in both the fall and spring of Head Start had stronger early reading and vocabulary skills than those who achieved English proficiency only later in

the year. In addition, DLL made greater improvements in their classroom behavior over the course of the year than demonstrated by non-DLL children. Future analyses should include programs with various proportions of DLL children (high, low, none); child outcomes (e.g., English assessment scores, behavior ratings); and program and classroom characteristics (e.g., classroom quality, teacher qualifications).

PAPER Two: Characteristics of Dual Language Learners and their Families in Head Start
Author and Presenter: Yair Ziv, Westat

There were three successive cohorts of the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES; 1997, 2000, 2003), each designed to provide comprehensive, longitudinal information on the characteristics, experiences, and outcomes for children and families served by Head Start (see <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/hs/faces/index.html>). Highlighted results showed that parents of dual language learners (DLL) were more likely to be involved in community and church activities with their children, but less involved in educational activities such as reading with their children than parents of non-DLL. Parents of DLL were less likely to have restrictive rules about behaviors in the home; they were also satisfied with the services provided to them by Head Start. Differences between 2000 and 2003 data suggest a trend for some demographic characteristics, whereby families of DLL may be appearing more similar to families of English-speaking children in the later cohort.

PAPER SYMPOSIUM: Language and Literacy Research with English Language Learners: Connections Between Research and Practice

Discussant: Patton O. Tabors

PAPER One: The Nuestros Niños Early Language and Literacy Program: A Teacher Quality Improvement Intervention

Author and Presenter: Dina C. Castro, University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill

Professional development can be used to affect teaching practices related to language and literacy learning among preschool Latino English Language Learners. Results of a random assignment experiment (Total N=60) showed that teacher quality improvement interventions yielded gains in teacher classroom practices related to the promotion of language and literacy in children. The interventions yielded gains in the creation of a classroom environment that promotes language and literacy in English language learners. Also, children in the intervention classrooms had moderately higher scores in the spring (after adjusting for fall) than children in the control classrooms for varied English and Spanish phonological awareness skills.

Paper Two: "They're Following Me": Findings from a Longitudinal Study of Bilingual Preschoolers' Language and Literacy Development

Authors: Carol Scheffner Hammer, Adele W. Miccio, Frank R. Lawrence, Barbara L. Rodriguez, Megan Dunn Davison, Pennsylvania State University
Presenter: Carol Scheffner Hammer

What are the differences between the language and literacy trajectories of bilingual children who learned both Spanish and English from birth as compared to monolingual Spanish-speaking children? To determine the impact and characteristics of home and classroom environments on children's language and literacy development, the researchers studied children attending urban Head Start centers in central Pennsylvania. Results indicated that the use of English in the home did not appear to impact English-emergent literacy or English vocabulary, but the use of English more than half the time in the home slowed Spanish language development. Conversely, the use of Spanish in the home did not impact English outcomes but promoted Spanish vocabulary development. The authors concluded that when children attend an English-immersion program and the home is the primary source of Spanish, the continued parental use of Spanish is needed to support Spanish language development (Gutiérrez-Clellen and Kreiter, 2003; Duursma et al., 2007).

PAPER Three: Studying the Development of English Language Learners through Research Collaborations with Head Start Agencies in Florida

Author and Presenter: Lisa M. Lopez, University of South Florida

Oral language and phonological awareness abilities of 100 Spanish-speaking Head Start children were assessed. The study found a significant association between children's oral language skills and their phonological awareness in both English and Spanish. In addition, children who entered preschool speaking two languages performed similarly in oral language and phonological awareness to their monolingual peers. The author concluded that if these children received ongoing support in both languages, their abilities across both languages might eventually surpass those of their monolingual peers.

Conference Posters

This section includes posters related to the topic of English Language Learners that were presented during the poster sessions at the conference.

Examining the Shared Bookreading Styles of Low-Income, Latino Caregivers and Their Children

Authors: Catherine Bracaliello, Ageliki Nicolopoulou, Patricia H. Manz, Julie Curran, Lehigh University

Presenters: Catherine Bracaliello, Ageliki Nicolopoulou, Patricia H. Manz

Forty (40) low-income caregivers (predominantly Latino) and their children were observed during shared bookreading, an important context for the development of vocabulary and oral language skills. The study examined the variation in what caregivers' said and how they said it, according to the caregivers' native language and children's receptive

language abilities. Results showed that, on average, caregivers provided information more frequently about the story than they requested information or directed children's attention. Also, mothers of children with greater receptive language abilities were much more likely to provide information, whereas mothers of children with lesser abilities were more likely to request information.

Text and Language Connections: Bilingual English-Spanish–Speaking Children's Early Literacy Skills

Authors: Margaret Sarah Caspe, Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.; Jamie Gonzalez, Gigliana Melzi, New York University

Presenters: Margaret Sarah Caspe, Jamie Gonzalez, Gigliana Melzi, Joy Lorenzo Kennedy (New York University)

It was expected that narrative ability would be associated with early literacy within a bilingual English-Spanish speaking sample of 73 4-year-old, Latino children in Head Start. Results showed that children knew, on average, about half of the print concepts (6 of 13) and about half of their letters (25 of 54); their narratives were 45 utterances long on average, and included more referential information (e.g., descriptions, events) than evaluative information (e.g., internal states, emotions); 4-year-olds demonstrated both print-related and language-related skills, but both skills were still developing. The total score on the concepts about print measure was significantly and positively related to narrative coherence (i.e., ability to tell a clear story). Findings suggest that narrative competence may build text-based understanding and conversely, knowledge of text may feed into the ability to tell a good story.

Language Development and Bilingual Children: The Relation of Home Language and Literacy Environment

Authors and Presenters: Brandy Lee Clarke, Lisa L. Knoche, Danielle Bauer, Sandie Plata-Potter, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

The authors considered the associations between home language, home literacy environment and the language development of 25 Spanish-speaking children entering Head Start. Results of the study showed that the number of people in the home interacted with more literacy materials in the home to explain the variance in Spanish-speaking children's total concept knowledge. The authors conclude that the greater number of people in the home increases the opportunities for interactive use of the home literacy materials, and this in turn improved school readiness skills: children with more people and more materials tended to have the higher scores.

Understanding Language Development in ELL Preschoolers: Making the Connection between Language Dominance, Phonological Abilities, and Vocabulary Development

Authors: Timothy David Hill, Lisa M. Lopez, University of South Florida; Adele W. Miccio, Carol Scheffner Hammer, Pennsylvania State University; Barbara L. Rodriguez, University of New Mexico

Presenters: Timothy David Hill, Lisa M. Lopez

This study examined English and Spanish vocabulary performance and phonological skills of 36 Cuban and Puerto Rican children, ages 3–6 years old. English phonological skills were found to be related to the frequency of English use. Findings also revealed a strong association between English phonology and English vocabulary among ELL children, suggesting that measurement of phonology skills may serve as a proxy assessment for English vocabulary abilities.

Language Development in Mexican- and Dominican-American Toddlers at 14 Months and 24 Months: Relations to Home Experiences and Cognitive Development

Authors: Fernanda Lucchese, Catherine S. Tamis-LeMonda, Ronit Kahana Kalman, Annie Dalebroux, Rebecca B. Skolnick, New York University

Presenters: Fernanda Lucchese

There is limited available information regarding early toddler and infant bilingual language development. To address this gap, 130 low-income Dominican- and Mexican-American toddlers were assessed at 14 and 24 months of age. Toddlers' "productive vocabularies" were analyzed through interviews with mothers, assessment of children's receptive and expressive language and word types by the MacArthur Communicative Development Inventories tool, and the assessment of children's cognitive development by the Mullen Scales of Early Learning (Mullen score). Productive vocabulary is the ability to produce a word when speaking or writing. The study found that by 1 and 2 years of age, Dominican-American children had an advantage over Mexican-American children in their English vocabulary size. In contrast, the mean number of words produced and word types used in Spanish by children did not differ across groups. Dominican-Americans were more likely to be exposed to English at home, although both groups had high English exposure through siblings and television programs. In both Dominican- and Mexican-Americans, vocabulary size was significantly correlated to Mullen scores at 24 months. Future studies should analyze the longer term effects of early language exposure on the development of immigrant children.

Low-Income, Spanish-English Bilingual Children's Conceptual Vocabulary Knowledge: Why the Application of the Spanish IDHC Norms May be Misleading

Authors and Presenters: Jeannette Mancilla-Martinez, Barbara Alexander Pan, Harvard Graduate School of Education

For a total conceptual vocabulary score (TVC), the bilingual child receives points whether they offer a correct response in English or Spanish. But researchers and practitioners alike

are challenged by how to interpret these scores. This study investigated whether the number of Spanish-English bilingual children who are identified as at-risk changes depending on whether the Spanish or English norms are used to evaluate the total conceptual vocabulary (TCV) scores. The sample consisted of EHS/HS children from 24 to 36 months of age. The study compared standard scores derived from both the English and Spanish norms of the Communicative Development Inventories tool. Careful review of the results suggested that the use of Spanish norms to interpret EHS/HS children's TCV scores seemed most reasonable considering the wider range of socioeconomic status in the Spanish *Inventario del Desarrollo de Habilidades Comunicativas: Palabras y Enunciados* (IDCH) norming sample. However, tools specifically designed for, and normed on, young bilingual children should be developed as well.

Bilingual Children's English and Spanish Expressive Language Skills: A Focus on Individual Differences in Syntactic Complexity, Lexical Diversity, and Verb Morphology

Authors and Presenters: Barbara L. Rodriguez, University of New Mexico; Amanda Winslow, Carol Scheffner Hammer, Adele W. Miccio, Pennsylvania State University

It has been suggested that the children's total language experience shapes their language abilities and skills. This study explored the language development of a group of children exposed to both English and Spanish since birth as compared to a group of children exposed to English only when school-aged. The English and Spanish semantic and syntactic language skills of 12 bilingual Head Start children of Puerto Rican descent were examined in the longitudinal study. Despite the sample's homogeneity, there was substantial variability in the children's semantic and syntactic skills. Bilingual children's language development appears to be particularly sensitive to changes in language input resulting in fluctuating proficiency over time. The authors suggested that accurate assessment of the language abilities of bilingual children must include assessment in both languages utilizing multiple methods (e.g., language sampling, parent interviews) across multiple time points.

For Further Information

For more details on any of the selected presentations and posters, please contact the presenters listed directly. Presenter contact information can be found in the index of the conference program. ([Creating Connections: Head Start's Ninth National Research Conference 2008 Program Book](#))

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2006). *Biennial Report to Congress: The Status of Children in Head Start Programs, 2005*. Washington, DC: Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families.