

Strategies to increase DLLs' language production and engagement in preschool classrooms

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OVERVIEW

Dual language learners (DLLs) are young students who are learning two or more languages at the same time. In the United States, DLL students typically learn Standard American English in school while speaking a different language or dialect at home. This creates a unique opportunity for these students to become fluent in two languages, however, this ability is not always nurtured or encouraged in the classroom. This paper offers evidence-based strategies to help teachers create a positive, supportive environment in which DLL students participate and are engaged in the lesson as seen in the scenario below.

Miss Cindy is leading a small group activity in her Head Start class. She hands out paper and crayons to her students and explains they will be creating paper fishbowls. Many students begin drawing, but Brian continues to sit quietly. Miss Cindy turns to him and gives the same instructions in Spanish. After doing so, Brian looks more enthusiastic and begins drawing as well. Later in the lesson, Brian's classmate Dina turns and starts talking with him in Spanish about the picture she is drawing. Miss Cindy goes around the group, looking at everyone's drawing and complimenting their colorful fish in English. Then Miss Cindy announces to the whole class, "What beautiful pictures you all are making! ¡Que lindos dibujos!"

Strategy 1: Incorporating Home Language

In the scenario above, Miss Cindy uses Spanish and English to engage Brian in the lesson. Using a student's home language can help DLLs feel comfortable in the classroom by assuring them the use of their home language is allowed and welcomed. Additionally, it can provide needed translations for classroom instruction or context to new vocabulary.

❖ What does this look like in classrooms?

Teachers with some proficiency in their students' home language can provide vocabulary from the lesson and help clarify classroom rules in this language. In the scenario above, Miss Cindy uses Spanish to explain the activity to Brian, who did not seem to understand the lesson beforehand.

❖ How can English speaking teachers incorporate this strategy into their classroom?

Mr. Jay provides all six students in his small group with a plastic knife and play dough explaining that they are going to make pizza. One of his DLL students, Chris, looks confused at what to do with the knife. Mr. John asks another student, Matthew, "How do you say knife in Spanish"? Matthew responds "Cuchillo". Mr. John looks at Chris and says "cuchillo" and makes a cutting motion.

When teachers do not know the student's home language, asking students how they say a word in their language can demonstrate teacher's interest in the child's language and help bridge

learning between students with different proficiencies in English. Additionally, teachers can prepare for lessons by researching the words for key vocabulary and materials in a child's home language. A similar technique is for teachers to research greetings in a child's home's language and greet students with these words or phrases and encourage children to do the same.

Strategy 2: One-on-One Conversations

In our work, we have observed that one-on-one conversations between a teacher and a student can be a great opportunity to connect with DLLs who are less engaged, shy in bigger classroom settings, or overlooked by more verbal students. These conversations check their understanding of the lesson and help develop their language skills.

❖ How can one-on-one conversations be incorporated in classrooms?

Teachers may not always have enough time to have one-on-one conversations with all students in a day. It is helpful for teachers to keep track of what students they have these exchanges with throughout the week.

Then, teachers should make it a goal to spend more time with students who had less or even none of these exchanges.

To encourage conversation, teachers should pose open-ended questions instead of ones that can be answered with a one worded response. Questions beginning with *how*, *why*, and *what if* can inspire deeper thinking in students. Examples include:

- How do you know that?
- Why do you think that?
- What would happen if we did this instead?

Mealtimes and playtime can provide a great opportunity for teachers to ask about students' interests and home lives. Questions like "*what did you do this weekend?*" can reaffirm these students in teachers' interest in them.

Strategy 3: Peer-to-Peer Conversation

A third strategy to engage DLLs is to include activities with peer discussion. One way to intentionally incorporate this is to pair DLLs with a classmate who has higher English

proficiency as it exposes them to new vocabulary. If DLLs are quieter, like Brian in the scenario above, pairing them up with a student who shares their home language can increase their verbal participation. Peer collaboration can also be an opportunity for DLLs to become a source of knowledge among peers if teachers set the context of peer engagement as one where both students have equally important roles, and their interaction is key to solving the problem.

Examples of activities for a DLL and a monolingual classmate:

- Teachers can task students with selecting classroom objects for which they will have to tell the class both the English word and the DLL's language word.
- Teachers can also pair children who have different home languages on a scavenger hunt in which they must find objects in the classroom. Beforehand, teachers should label some in the DLL's home language and others in English.

Strategy 4: Small Group Activities

It is important for teachers to incorporate small group activities into the lesson. Small group activities can be useful in incorporating other strategies mentioned in this article. For example, when grouping by DLL status or language background, teachers can include the students' home language into the lesson more often by using materials that are not in English or providing needed context in their home language. Small group activities can also be a setting to encourage students to speak in pairs and then share back to the group. Ultimately, small group activities provide a setting that encourages DLLs to speak regardless of the language they use.

Conclusion

Like all students, DLLs deserve and benefit from a welcoming positive environment that is understanding of their specific needs and backgrounds. Using the strategies in this article can make this less challenging and will invite DLLs to engage in the lesson and build their confidence and skills when using both of their languages.