

What Families Can Do to Strengthen Language Skills for Young English Language Learners

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Abstract

With an increased number of children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds enrolled in P-12 schools, bilingual education has become a hot topic. This study aimed to understand how CLD families teach their young children two languages. Five CLD families participated in the study and shared information about teaching methods as well as perceived benefits and challenges in bilingual instruction. Results show all five families recognize the importance and value of bilingual education, and they mainly teach their young children native language through daily conversations and family activities and teach English through literacy activities such as book reading and games. The implications of this study are cultivating interests in bilingual instruction among young children, and delivering bilingual education through hands on activities, facilitating English acquisition through increased native language proficiency, and building bilingual instruction methods into pre-service teacher training programs to better prepare future teachers to work with young English language learners (ELLs).

Keywords: young ELLs, CLD families, interview, hands-on activities, multicultural, bilingual instruction

Introduction

With an increased number of children who speak another language than English at home enrolled in the U.S. P-12 schools, bilingual education has become a hot topic. Learning two languages at the same time poses challenges to these English Language Learners (ELLs) especially those during early elementary years. This study aimed to understand how culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families teach their young children two languages. A qualitative study including interview and observation was conducted to increase professionals' understanding of the CLD families' perceptions of bilingual instructions, the teaching methods as well as perceived benefits and challenges in bilingual instruction.

Background

The United States has grown more diverse in the past decade (U.S. Census, 2010). Compared to statistics in 2000, Asians alone increased 43.3%, Native Hawaiians and other Pacifica Islanders increased 35.4%, Hispanic or Latino population increased 43.3%, and two or more races increased 24.4% according to the U.S. Census 2010. With an increased number of children from CLD families enrolled in the U.S. P-12 schools, teachers, especially those teaching elementary grades, should learn how to address these young English language learners' (ELLs) special needs such as language delays, and social and behavioral deficits. During the early elementary years, ELLs need more support and help from both family members and teachers. Compared to preschoolers or children at an older age, children at early elementary years may struggle more academically due to the following reasons. For example, preschool ELLs are not really involved in intense academic activities yet, so they won't feel as frustrated as those in early elementary years. On the other hand, older children have already passed the stage when they struggle in bilingual education since they should have already mastered both their native language and English by this age.

Research indicates U.S. teachers are generally not well prepared to address special challenges ELLs face in school (Lewis, Maerten-Rivera, Adamson, & Lee, 2011). Without

proper training teachers may not realize the challenges the ELLs experience in learning English at school. Not only the P-12 teachers, but the school leaders such as principals and vice principals also need to learn more about the ELLs' "linguistic and cultural backgrounds in order to value the cultural perspectives and languages these students bring to schools" (Rosa, 2011, p. 1859). Family members, including parents, grandparents and other extended family members, could play a role in voicing the special challenges the ELLs may face at school and sharing their cultures with the professionals. In addition, they also can help their child acquire their native language and improve English at the same time. The current study informs researchers and practitioners of the experiences that CLD families have with bilingual instruction, bilingual instruction methods adopted by CLD families, and expectations CLD families have for support and collaboration from professionals.

Methodology

Participants

Five CLD families (Table 1) living in a northeastern state in the U.S. participated in the face-to-face interview. They all speak a language other than English as their native language and their children range between two and seven years old. Three participating families have two children, while the other two have one child. Two families sent their children to private schools and the other three chose public schools. One family complained of their child being hyperactive and having behavioral issues in school; however, the family opted not to have their son assessed by professionals for they didn't perceive special services as necessary at this point. This family, together with another two participating families, has both parents involved in the bilingual instruction. In the other two families, the mother plays a major role in the bilingual instruction, while the father travels a lot or manages family business overseas.

Table 1
Demographic Background of Participating Families

| Pseudonym Occupation | Children and their age | Educational backgrounds | Ethnicity |
|------------------------------|---|-------------------------|-----------|
| Su K-12 teacher | Daughter: 5 years old | Ph.D. | Chinese |
| Mei Higher Education | Daughter: 5 years old Son: 3 years old | M.S. | Chinese |
| Qing Family Doctor | Son: 5 and ½ years old Son: 3 years old | M.D. | Chinese |
| Sung Min Higher Education | Son: 5 years old | Ph.D. | Korean |
| Jae Hong Family Business | Son: 7 years old Daughter: 3 and ½ years old | M.S. | Korean |

Setting

The interviews with the four out of five families occurred at the participants' home. The other one family received the interview at a community church and this family also agreed to participate in the observation of the bilingual instruction. Besides this family, another family also

agreed to participate in the observation and invited the researcher to their home to observe the bilingual instruction.

Interview and Observation Protocol

The participating families were notified of the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of the information they provided in the interview, their rights to withdraw from the study, and value of their input. Mothers in four participating families accepted the interview and the other family included both parents in the interview. Before the interviews, basic family demographic information was collected, such as when the child was sent to English speaking early childhood education programs and who in the family played major roles in teaching bilingual education. Other basic information that was also collected included the participants' age, educational background, occupation, ethnicity, and number of children and their ages. All the questions in the interview were open ended questions. Sample interview questions included "What are the strategies you used when you taught your child the bilingual education?" and "What are the foreseen benefits of teaching bilingual education?" The interview lasted no longer than an hour.

After the interview, the researcher observed two families for twenty minutes while they taught their child/children bilingual instruction. The families were observed on how they interact with their child during bilingual instruction and the methods of bilingual instruction. The observation focuses on the way that caregivers interact with their children (passive teaching or interactive learning), whether and how the cultural knowledge is embedded in the bilingual instruction, and the child's interests in learning two languages with parents. Notes were taken during both the interviews and observations.

Data Collection and Analysis

Since the researcher shared the same native language (Mandarin) with three participating families, the interviews with these families were conducted in their native language. The researcher took notes on site in the native language and translated the notes into English afterwards. For the other two families with whom the researcher doesn't share a common native language, the interview was in English and notes were taken in English. After each interview, the notes were transcribed and summarized immediately. Data analysis consisted of an examination of families' responses to the interview questions and the notes taken during the two observations. Codes were identified and common themes were summarized. The two observations supplemented information collected through the interviews about the bilingual instruction methods used by the families in this study.

Results

According to the analysis of qualitative data collected through interviews and observations, three main themes were identified including (a) bilingual instruction methods, (b) benefits and challenges of bilingual instruction, and (c) training of pre-service and in-service teachers.

Bilingual Instruction Time

All of the five families admitted that they started bilingual instruction for their children at birth. Three participating families mainly used their native language to communicate with their children at home and in the meantime they read books or did other literacy activities in English with their children. The other two families spoke their native language and English approximately 50% of the time respectively at home. In these two families, the fathers only spoke in English while the mothers in their native language only, although the parents communicated in their native language between them. The mothers mentioned sometimes their children were confused about what to use when both parents were present.

Four families admitted they spent less than one hour on English instruction, although they incidentally taught their children their native language for at least four hours daily. This included the normal routines of meals, baths, and play. Only one family who has one parent speak English with their daughter consistently admitted they spent more time in English instruction. For example, when the father was playing with the daughter or when he took her shopping, it was more like an English-only environment since the father only spoke English to their daughter. Compared to the ELLs in the other four participating families, their daughter is more proficient in areas of English such as good vocabulary size, better conversation and writing skills, and good receptive skills. The father of this family was not as concerned as other parents about his daughter's social interactions with peers in school. However, among the ELLs in the participating families, this little girl struggled the most in native language acquisition. She had difficulty communicating with her family in their native language. Although the other four families also complained about their children's limitations in their native language as compared to the same age native speaking children, they admitted their children mastered basic communication skills in their native language.

Methods of Bilingual Instruction

Four of the five participating families mentioned they used native language for daily conversations at home because they hope their children can master native language before becoming fluent in English. All of the participating families read books to teach their children in English. Two participating families read books in native language first, then reminded their child of the equivalent English terms. When reading English books, the mother paused and asked questions in native language, so that the child could think in native language and English at the same time. The other two families read books twice, once in native language and then in English. One participating family only read English books and did not plan to introduce books in native language until the third grade, because they worried that it is too confusing to learn two phonological systems at the same time. The finding of learning a language through reading correlates with Uchiyama's (2011) conclusion that using both simple reading and character imagery improves ELLs' vocabulary-building and thus improves comprehension.

Other than learning English through book reading, these young ELLs also learn English through playing games and other literacy activities such as nursery songs at home. All of these children were enrolled in English speaking early education programs before three years old. One of the families even sent their son to daycare at birth because they wanted their child to be exposed to English as early as possible. All the families attributed daycare and preschool programs to helping their young children improve their English skills.

Benefits of Bilingual instruction

All of the families believed that only when their young children start learning both languages at a young age can they reach the native speaker's level. Although bilingual instruction may cause the ELLs to lag behind their monolingual speaking peers, they can catch up in both languages later.

Increase marketability. Being raised in a bilingual environment is an advantage for the ELLs; they have opportunities to learn and practice both of the two languages, which help them gain extra skills and thus become more competitive in the future. All of the five participating families realized the importance and value of bilingual education.

Cultural diversity and plurality. Two families mentioned "through bilingual instruction, my son learned the importance of cultural diversity and plurality." One family even emphasized that "bilingual skills will benefit my child's cognitive development and language skills in the long run." Both parents in this family have a degree in education and have a background in teaching

ELL students. Compared to other families, this family taught their daughter phonological knowledge in a systematic way from a young age in addition to book reading and playing games to practice the bilingual skills.

Challenges in Bilingual Instruction

Phonological similarity. Given that certain words in some native languages sound similar to certain unrelated words in English, bilingual instruction causes confusion and difficulty for young ELLs at the early stage of studying two phonological systems. Consequently, one family mentioned postponing the instruction of phonics until a later age. When asked “why do you plan to hold off from teaching your daughter phonics in your native language until third grade?” this mother answered, “because by third grade, my daughter should be able to master English phonics so it will be less confusing for her to learn phonics in our native language.”

Lack of native community. The participating families all live in rural areas of a northeastern state. Two families complained that the lack of a native speaking community limits their child’s use of native language. Although the other three families all speak the same native language and there is a larger group of native speakers in the community, these families also stressed that their children have limited opportunities of using native language in the community, which hindered their native language acquisition. One family shared that when they brought their children to a native speaking community either in large cities of the U.S. or in their home country, their children felt pressured to practice the native language. When they went back to the home community, however, the young ELLs gave up practicing their native language because nobody around them used that language except their family members. Only one family is an exception. This family immigrated to the U.S. when their grandparents were young, so the child’s father was raised in the U.S. and preferred to speak English to the native language. For most of the ELLs, however, they only have limited time at school to use English. It appears a lack of English instruction during early childhood caused language barriers among these ELLs.

Self-identity was another issue brought up by the participating families. Due to lack of use of native language and exposure to the native community, young ELLs struggled to identify their own culture and who they were. One family shared that their son woke up one morning, looked at himself in the mirror, and screamed “Mom, look at my eyes, it became blue; and my hair turned brown.” The mother mentioned that her son really wanted to be like his Caucasian friends as he is the only child of color in his class. He obviously did not understand his own culture.

Conclusion and Implications

This paper reported findings from an interview study with five CLD families and observation of two of these families during their bilingual instruction session. Overall, all five of the participating families feel fortunate to have their children raised in a bilingual environment. These families feel that bilingual education benefits young children’s cognitive and language skills, and it provides them extra skills so that they have more choices and become more competitive in future careers. All of these families encouraged their young children to study and practice native language at home through daily conversations, while also teaching them English through book reading and playing English games. These young ELLs mainly learned and practiced English through daily interaction with peers in school. However, since these ELLs spent less time in school than at home, most of them lagged behind their same age monolingual peers. This delay in English negatively impacted the ELLs’ social skills and self-confidence, which were pointed out by four out of the five participating families. This language deficit partly comes from the schools, since the parents felt the schools did not provide enough support to

these young ELLs and teachers were not well prepared for addressing their children's special challenges and needs. Below are some suggestions and implications from the current study.

Implications

Interest as the best teacher. One participating family mentioned their son was passionate to learn two languages before three years old. He was curious about how to say certain words in the native language, but he lost interest in learning the native language when he started preschool. He refused to use native language and when his parents talked to him in native language, he persisted in using English to respond to questions. The mother was puzzled about why all of sudden her son stopped using native language. She happened to find out what caused this change when she went to pick up her son one day. She noticed her son was being teased by his classmates for speaking in his native language and no teachers were there to stop this behavior. After this incident, the mother tried every means to bring other cultures to the classroom. She volunteered to come to her son's class to talk about their native festivals, traditional attire, and food.

In order to draw ELLs' interest in bilingual instruction, teachers can arrange special sessions to introduce diverse cultures and languages during class periods, celebrate holidays that other cultures observe, and teach students simple daily conversations in other languages. These activities will also cultivate multicultural views among young children. One of the five families mentioned the preschool program their children attended hosted multicultural activities such as celebrating festivals of other cultures and taught them to count and sing songs in another language. This practice broadens young children's horizons, facilitates their understanding of other cultures, and triggers interest in learning other cultures. Reading books about other cultures also helps young children understand other values, traditions, and in turn respect others' cultures.

More hands-on activity. It is recommended that before third grade, when these young ELLs still haven't mastered native speaking language skills in both their native language and English, school should offer more hands-on activities to ELLs and put them in small groups with native speaking peers to maximize the ELLs' communication and interaction with peers and build their self-confidence. Lewis et al. (2011) reviewed previous literature on science instruction with ELL students and summarized that ELLs benefit greatly from hands on activities. When teaching other skills such as reading, writing and mathematics, hands-on activities are preferred in early elementary years. For example, teachers can ask children to match pictures to difficult words or words for which ELLs lack experience. When teaching the St. Patrick's Day topic, teachers can involve students in cutting, making, or coloring leprechauns and shamrocks. First, teachers can ask each child to share about his project, and then teachers can talk about the tradition of St. Patrick's Day. In order to enhance families learning English traditions at home, teachers can send home flyers about the tradition and what their child did in school to keep CLD families updated with school activities and projects. When the CLD families are well informed of the English traditions, they become more involved in engaging their children in hands-on academic activities at home.

Relaxed language learning environment. CLD families should reduce pressure on ELLs and avoid pushing them to practice either their native language or English. It takes time for young ELLs to catch up with their monolingual peers. Bilingual instruction at home can cause delays in both the native and English language acquisition. One of the participating families mentioned their daughter started speaking their native language in English syntax at three years old. The parents decided to speak naturally to their daughter and gave her time to grow. When they noticed some combination of native language and English in one sentence, they modeled the correct way to say it in both native language and English respectively. By age

six, this little girl had fewer syntax issues and her language proficiency in native language had greatly improved. Occasionally she still spoke native language in English syntax but not as much as when she was three or four years old. Modeling is the key. Parents modeled for her how to speak in their native language every time they noticed she struggled speaking certain words in the native language. Also, parents encouraged her to talk freely without worrying about making mistakes. Although it took time for her to realize what she said was not in the correct syntax, she gradually learned to self-adjust her discourse. This is a good example that bilingual learners can learn two languages at the same time, although some ELLs may spend a longer period of time in one stage, such as putting two words together or making simple sentences in either English or the native language.

Create a literacy rich environment. Huennekens and Xu's (2010) study showed reading stories in native language could strengthen young ELLs "early language and literacy skills while encouraging continued involvement with home culture" (p. 25). Improving reading in the native language also helps ELLs learn English. Family should be informed the value and "benefit of supporting ELLs' language and literacy development in the home language" (Gorman, 2012, p. 119). Knowledge in native language also helps ELLs generalize what they know in native language to increase reading comprehension in English. For example, one participating family shared that their daughter struggled with several words when she read a story about a Hispanic family celebrating traditional festivals. But when the mother reminded her of their own traditional festival celebrations, she guessed several words right and predicted what would happen in the following section of the story. Increasing vocabulary supports "word decoding and reading comprehension" (Gorman, 2012, p. 119).

Development of self-confidence. Parents should help young ELLs develop self-confidence and self-concept through bilingual instruction and reducing behavior issues. Another issue the majority of the participating families are concerned about is language deficits impairing their children's self-confidence. It is true that due to a language delay, young ELLs may feel intimidated or uncomfortable when talking in front of strangers or a large group of people. Two of the participating families pointed out that their children can answer similar questions at home, but not in school. One family said their daughter failed a kindergarten screening test the first time because she refused to answer any questions the teachers asked or follow the test directions. Her test results came out as not understanding English and having severe internalizing behavior problems (e.g., shyness, no eye contact). Her former preschool teacher disagreed with the result, because she was confident that this girl could answer all the questions correctly and communicate well in English. This former preschool teacher pointed out this girl would not talk when she was with strangers or when she felt tense and stressed in the environment. According to her previous teacher, she is a slow-to-warm up child. It is recommended that elementary school teachers should not only use the screening test to evaluate young children's development, but refer to other sources such as consulting previous teachers to get authentic data about the child's current level of development. It would also be helpful to adopt alternative types of assessment, such as observation of play. Once this child was enrolled in the elementary school, the teachers immediately realized that the test result was misleading. This girl proved herself to be a completely different child in her classroom once she became familiar with her homeroom teacher and peers. She was active, liked to talk, and willingly offered help to peers.

Similar unpleasant experiences with school teachers also happened to other families who participated in the current study. Due to one mother's work schedule, their child had attended two different preschool programs. The mother noticed her son behaved completely different in the two schools he attended. Teachers in one school shared with her that the boy was very active and liked to play with others and talk to teachers in their school. The boy even

brought a book to this school in order to read to his peers. On the contrary, in the other school the boy behaved quite differently. His teachers said he did not listen to authority and constantly had behavior problems. He acted wildly when he was outside on the playground. The mother complained teachers in this second school did not provide a nurturing, loving environment, which led to her son's behavior issues in the second school. It is speculated that the teachers in this second environment did not understand the language delay this boy experienced and failed to provide support to him.

Training of the pre-service and in-service teachers. The above example leads to the next suggestions and implications for future pre-service teacher training programs and early childhood education programs. Bilingual instruction should be embedded into program requirements. In order to become certified early childhood and early childhood special education teachers, teacher candidates should master basic knowledge and develop an understanding of the struggles and special challenges young ELLs experience in bilingual acquisition. This way, future teachers develop a better understanding of ELLs' cultural backgrounds and special challenges to better serve them. Rosa (2011) recommended that support should be provided to educators and leaders on "obtaining research-based instructional practices for ELLs" (p. 1863). Not only the pre-service teachers, but also the in-service teachers require training and support in order to better serve young ELLs and their families.

One participating family shared their interaction with school teachers regarding the English as a Second Language (ESL) program their daughter attended. The family only received information about the ESL program once per year. The letter showed their child's test score in an English proficiency test, but only knowing the score is not enough. When they contacted school teachers for more information about this ESL program curriculum and their daughter's progress and weak areas in English, the school did not provide the information they wanted to know. The teachers just explained the test and their daughter's test results, which the family did not perceive as helpful. After one year of the ESL class, the parents still were not sure what their daughter's strengths or weaknesses were. The family was very upset with what had happened to their daughter and frustrated because they believed the school was not helpful. They decided to continue their intensive bilingual instruction plan at home for their daughter by purchasing bilingual textbooks to teach their daughter reading, mathematics, science and social studies themselves.

It is evident that more communication between CLD families and school teachers will help clarify ELLs' English language skills and weaknesses that ELLs still need to improve. Professionals at early childhood education programs should develop collaborative partnerships with CLD families, look for better ways to understand young ELLs' special needs and challenges in the process of bilingual education, and support families in bilingual literacy activities at home. Teachers can develop connections with families through sending home projects their children participate in and notify parents of their child's English level and special programs they attended in school, the curriculum in these programs, the frequency of attending these programs, and the progress their child made at these programs.

Limitations and Final Thoughts

Given there are only five participating families in this study and all of them live in rural areas which lack diverse populations and communities, it is hard to generalize the findings to other CLD families who live in metropolitan areas in the U.S. and have more bilingual learning opportunities both in school and community. This study, however, informs professionals of the bilingual methods CLD families used to teach their child their native language and English at home, the CLD families' perceived benefits and challenges of bilingual instruction, and their expectations of school teachers and professionals in the process of bilingual instruction.

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