

Dual Language Learners Institute General Session 2008 - Carol Hammer

Carol Hammer: Well good morning. It is so nice to be here and to talk with you about a topic that I'm very passionate about and that I spend my...every waking moment thinking about dual language learners and how we can assist programs and assist families helping their children maximize their abilities. So let me make sure this is working... As you all know young dual language learners are increasing in numbers across the U.S. as well as the number of languages that we are being asked to serve in various Head Start programs.

And programs have this challenge of helping children develop their language abilities as well as their school-readiness abilities. And, as you know, what we're talking about today is really the added challenge of assessing and monitoring children's abilities. So the purpose of my part of the presentation is to talk about what we know about dual language learners' language development.

And a lot of what I'll be talking about comes from review of the research that's been done over the years but also my colleagues and I conducted a longitudinal study of bilingual Head Start children who are Spanish speakers. We followed them for two years in Head Start and followed them all through second grade and so we've learned a lot by looking at the children's in-depth abilities in language and literacy.

And then I also want to help you kind of apply this information to assessment so that you can take this information, then, into the follow-up, the breakout sessions and can then, kind of, go home and take all this wonderful information home. When I'm talking about dual language learners I'm really using a very broad definition of dual language learners because to me any child that's being exposed to two languages is a dual language learner, and we need to think about them differently than monolingual language learners.

So these children are generally broken up into two groups very generally. Sequential learners are children that are learning two languages but they started learning their home language at home, not surprisingly, and then added a second language later in life, usually around three or four is usually considered the age. And often this happens when kids go into Head Start.

And so at this time there's really a drastic change in their language-learning environment because they've come from a home say where family members have been talking to them in Spanish and all of a sudden now they're in a program where they're being exposed to a lot of English. And then the other group are simultaneous learners. And sometimes I think we forget about these children who come to us with capabilities in English but have also been learning Spanish.

And so these children also have language abilities that are different than monolinguals. So what I want to share with you is what do we know about children's language development and then what does this mean for assessment? The first kind of major point, there are eight major points that I'm going through here, is that bilingual language development is not the same as monolingual language development. But DLLs do, dual language learners do learn first words at the same time as monolinguals.

They do produce two-word utterances together at the same time, and they also produce sentences at the same time but their paths may be different. And so what we need to recognize and what Groszhan said almost twenty years ago is that bilinguals are not two monolinguals in one, so we shouldn't expect that the children's English abilities and I will use kind of the default language of children's Spanish language abilities should not be considered like they're going to follow those normal paths that monolinguals do.

Their language experiences are very different. They are learning two different languages, so they have different experiences. They have different people using different languages with them in different times whereas monolingual children have just a different – not a better or...not a better or a preferred way – but they just have one language input coming to them all the time. So as a result, the children's – bilingual children's language development may be different over time.

It may look different and in some cases it may look slow but we just need to give them time and I'll touch on that in

just a minute. So what does this mean for our assessment? We cannot expect dual language learners' development to be like monolinguals. We can't compare them.

But what we really need to do, and a lot of times there's emphasis on looking at children's English abilities, and their developing abilities in English, which is really important, but we also need to look and understand what's happening in that first language, their L1. And if you don't speak their first language, that's fine. We can work with that. And what you want to do is gather information, as Amanda said, to talk to parents.

Parents are with their children and have been with their children all their lives, twenty-four hours a day before they've come up to you in Head Start. They have a lot of information and so you want to talk to them. You can also use your classroom assistants, who have a lot of information about children's language development and about the language – for example, Spanish the children may be speaking and so you can build on their resources as well.

Okay. Number two. Dual language learners need time to catch up to monolinguals. On average what we see with the research unfortunately shows us is that dual language learners begin Head Start with letter knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, and what the research has shown us is that it takes five to seven years to learn academically. So if their first language is not supported and children aren't building content knowledge as they're learning English, they have the potential to fall further and further behind.

And our data looking at Head Start children supports this. So I told Sharon I wasn't going to have a lot of data slides, but I have a couple data slides in here. Oh...oh...I guess the data slides are not in here. Ahha! Sharon had a secret...let me just see...no...they're not there. [Audience laughter, chattering] Well I will try and describe what the data look like. [Someone talks off stage]

Right, yeah. What happened is the data slides weren't supp...they weren't in your handout but they were supposed to be up on the screen, but they're not there. But we can live with that. Essentially what this showed is that we have kids that were sequential and simultaneous learners, so even children that had knowledge of English when they came to Head Start fell below monolingual expectations. There's a range of monolingual expectations on...on testing. They started below.

The children that were sequential learners in their English vocabulary, in their English comprehension were even more below than our simultaneous learners. But what happened over time is that the children grew and they were catching up on monolinguals. So their kind of trajectory was going...was going upward. And what happened for...in vocabulary is the kids that were adding English after they went into Head Start, they were acquiring vocabulary at a faster rate.

So by time the kids got to kindergarten, they had...and at the end of kindergarten, had caught up in terms of English vocabulary and comprehension to monolinguals, but they needed that time. Now what we...ok. I was moving on, I was thinking, "My other data slide's coming later on...on their Spanish language abilities." And the same thing happened in their emergent literacy.

When we were working with the Head Start program – this is before the emphasis on literacy was...was in Head Start programs – and so what happened is there wasn't a lot of change in children's emergent literacy in English during Head Start but when the kids went to kindergarten, their abilities just shot up and they were right there in terms of monolingual norms and clearly the kids had a good base when they left Head Start. Oops. I knew I was going to do that. Okay.

So what does this mean for assessment? We need to give dual language learners time to learn English. We shouldn't expect them to be fluent in three months and to be six months. When I sometimes go into classrooms over the years people will say, "Well this child's been learning English since over three months. Why...why aren't they like all the other kids?" We really need to give them time. And what we also need to do is we need to monitor the children over time.

What we don't want to do is just see them at the beginning of the year and at the end of the year. And I know how popular the NRS is and I know that's gone but what you really need to do is look over time because when we looked

really carefully at how our kids were doing what we saw is we had some children that actually their scores were going down during the Head Start year and we had other children whose scores were going up during the Head Start year.

And we...when we looked at who these children were - and these were both sequential and simultaneous learners, it really didn't matter who they were - but we found that the kids that had actually started high in English were the ones that tended to go down and the ones that were starting low in English were moving up.

And to me what that tells me is that the language level in the classroom was really there for the kids that were low in English and they were really benefitting from that but what was happening for the kids that were starting higher is they weren't getting all the support that they needed and so the language levels probably weren't quite as complex to help them continue to boost that. So we really need to see what's going on over time.

And of course there can be children at any level that may be decreasing in terms of their abilities or at least not making the same level of growth. It's not that they were losing language, it's just that they weren't growing at the same time. So we've got to look over time to see what is happening. All right. Number three. In terms of dual language learners' vocabulary, it's the same as monolingual children's vocabulary but what we have to understand is that if you separate the two languages, the vocabularies look smaller.

But if you put them together the vocabularies are...are the same. And what happens is kids develop concepts in Spanish, they develop concepts in English but they don't necessarily learn them at the same time. What they tend to do is have a vocabulary that they come to Head Start with that's from the home, and so they've learned all this vocabulary that's related to the home: things in the living room, in the dining room, all the kitchen utensils.

But in many homes, because emphasis is on the relationship with the child and not pushing the child developmentally, a lot of school readiness types of activities have not occurred. So children may not be taught their colors in...in their home language, shapes and some of those academic skills because parents view that as something they're going to learn in school. So you may go and you may test the child and say, "Oh, they don't even know colors in their home language."

Well maybe that's something that hasn't been a goal of the parent and over time what happens is parents may actually be teaching their children these concepts in English and may not even teach them in their home language because they realize that they're going to need to know this information in English and so they're emphasizing that. So remember that there are...there are two vocabularies that are developing that eventually children are learning parallel items as they...as they develop.

So what does this mean for assessment? Don't just look at one language. Again, talk to the parents about this. So we need to look at the vocabulary in both languages and remember don't expect that the children are necessarily going to know those school items and terms in their first language. As I said, they may be taught...they may not be emphasized at home or parents may have decided that English is the language that they should be teaching them in.

All right. Number four. Dual language learners use their knowledge of their first language to learn a second. And this is, to me, one of the most important points that I want you to go home with is that children are not starting from the beginning when they are learning English. Their knowledge of their first language is very beneficial.

And the way I like to think about this, and I do have to credit Annick De Houwer who is a wonderful international researcher on bilinguals and for getting me to think this way, that if I learn how to play the piano, I know all kinds of things about music. I know how to read music, I know where the notes are, I know what whole notes are, I know what keys are, I know the terms for louder and softer, and if I decide I want to play the violin, I can take all of that knowledge I've learned about music and transfer it over to the violin.

I need to learn technique, I need to learn fingerings, there are different aspects that I need to learn about playing the violin, but I'm not starting from scratch. And the same thing happens for our dual language learners. They learn...they use...they use that knowledge that they have in that home language and they transfer that over to what they're learning in English.

So for example, if they're learning that "gato" is cat in English, they don't start from scratch again, learning, "Oh what's a cat? Oh that's something that has ears and...and a tail and says, 'meow.'" They already know that so if they make that association between gato and cat they will...they've got a big head start on this. They know about nouns and verbs and adjectives. They know how to use language. They've used it to make requests and to ask questions and to make their needs known.

And so they just need to learn how to do that in English. So, kind of as they move along, children also are using their language knowledge as they are learning to read. What we do know is that children's phonological abilities from one language transfers over to another language. That is well established across the world.

We know less about how children are using their comprehension and vocabulary, but what our study has shown – and I was so excited...as a researcher it's like, "Oh, what if the results don't go the way you want them? How are you going to explain these to...to people?" – but what we found is that children's growth in receptive language during Head Start positively predicted, so this positively impacted, their reading development in kindergarten and first grade in both English and in Spanish. And we found the same thing for English.

Their growth in English language abilities during Head Start positively impacted their reading ability. So they were better and higher readers because of this growth that was occurring during Head Start. So we want to help that...facilitate their full language system and not just help with one part of the language system. So what does this mean? It's important to support language learners' first language as they learn English.

And one way, one easy way that you can do this is simply support parents' choices for using their home language. I have heard so many times parents being told that, "I was told not to speak to my child in Spanish," or "...to speak to my child in my native language." And that just always makes me feel so badly because once parents hear that, they just grab onto that and it's really hard to change their opinions on this. But if you think about it, language is where the relationships between parents and children are formed.

Parents have wonderful language abilities and if we ask them to speak in English and they don't know English, the quality of the language that the child hears really diminishes. The vocabulary the child hears diminishes, and so the language models the parents could be providing their children kind of go away. So since children are able to transfer what they know from their first language to their second, let's build that first language at home. And so whenever possible in your classrooms I would encourage you to do this as well.

And you may not be a native speaker, but what you can do is at least use your classroom assistants to help translate, to help transfer that knowledge for that child to teach some of the concepts the child knows, "Oh this is what you're talking about in my language." Make that simple association between gato and cat for them and they can transfer all that information over. Not saying you'll be able to do it for everything all over the day, throughout the daily routine, but make concentrated efforts to do this.

Maybe during your circle times or during the small group activities because without children's lang...without that support, children's first language development is not going to necessarily occur. I believe...yep...my data slide happens to be gone, but what we were able to show...[laughs] It happens.[Woman off camera talks] That's right. Sherry knows I can take too long to talk, so yes. She was helping me cut down my talk. [Laughs] [Audience laughs]

But anyway, what we did see is that our simultaneous learners, so kids that were learning two languages, their vocabulary did not change over time in Spanish. The sequential learners' Spanish language abilities did grow but the simultaneous learners, they were not growing, they were not catching up to the monolingual peers. And both groups actually were falling behind in their comprehension of Spanish over time. It's kind of a depressing slide to see. It kind of is a big "U" that...that takes them down.

So they're learning...they're losing their Spanish. And a lot of times...so sometimes we look too much to the home. I was talking to the superintendent of the district, one of the districts I work with most closely, and I was trying to express my concern that children were losing their first language and she said, "Yes. Isn't it a shame that parents don't

do more to help them keep their language?" [Audience murmurs] It's like, "Well, maybe the district could also help support this as well." All right.

In terms of number five: Dual language learners really vary in terms of their language abilities. There's a wide range of differences. We plotted how children's growth occurred and it's just a mess going up and down and people are going all over all the childrens are. But what you really want to think about is that children's abilities differ because of the vast variety of experiences that dual language learners have.

They differ in terms of the age of exposure to the two languages that they're learning and the amount of exposure that they receive. Just because they speak Spanish at home or speak another language at home doesn't mean it's a hundred percent Spanish. This could vary on the communicative context. Parents use different languages in different contexts.

They may even code-switch and...and...and use two languages in the context, the topic of the activity, the conversational topic may switch, it may talk...it may switch more to English when they're talking about school.

One mom told me once when I was doing a home visit with her that she didn't...she did not speak Spanish...or she did not speak English and her child was learning English, but they spoke Spanish at home but as soon as the child knew that I was coming, because she associated me with Head Start, the child started talking to her mom in English even though I was not there yet. So the power of school and the power of Head Start really has a big effect.

And so obviously their...their exposure to the two languages varies on the language of instruction in the classrooms and it varies over time. Children's language usage and even parents' language usage varies over time. What we did is we asked the moms every year, "What language do you speak to your child and what chil...what languages do your...does your child speak to you?" And what we found is that the moms and the children were increasingly using more and more English over...over time. And so it just kind of naturally happens for them.

So what does this mean for assessment? As Amanda said, you need to talk to the family and you need to gather information from the family. You want to find out the ages that the child was spoken to in their first language and their second language. And of course ask what language is being used in the home and you...what you really need to do is establish trust with the families, though.

A lot of times families think that what they...that what you want to hear is that they speak English and so they will tell you that they speak English at home when in fact they very well may not and what they're doing is speaking their home language, their native language at home. And so you want to build that trust. And so maybe you don't ask that the first time you meet them because they may likely think that what you want to hear is that they're speaking English. And so you want to know about that.

You want to know who speaks what language to what...to the child. It may be that Mom doesn't speak Eng...Spanish to the child but Grandma does and all the extended relatives do. It may be that there's an older sibling in the home, so Mom speaks Spanish and Dad speaks Spanish, but what happens is that there's older siblings and that presence of that older sibling who is going to school really influences the child and pushes the child towards English.

Obviously communication with grandparents can be very important and grandparents are much more likely to speak the native language. And we're even finding – we haven't had a chance to look at these data yet, but we have added when we talk to parents, we're asking, "Do they talk to their grandparents in...in...in their home countries?" And they do. They have weekly conversations with their grandparents and so they will hear that native language from their...their grandparents when they're talking to them on the phone.

And you also want to find out how long the child has lived in your area, has lived in their home country. Have they made trips back and forth? As you know, a lot of times families will go back for summers or they will take their child for a year back to their home country and then come back and forth. That kind of information is really important because the child's language dominance may be shifting with each move that they make.

And so you have to take that into account as you're trying to understand what's happening with children's language

development. All right. As I've already alluded to, usage of L1, their native language, at home is not bad for chingl...children's English development. And nicely we have some support from that from our Head Start study. What we found...what we did, as I said, we followed the mother's usage of language over time and these data are looking at two years in Head Start and kindergarten.

And as I said what we found is that their Eng...their English uses increases in time, but what we found is that moms...those moms that were changing to more and more English, that change did not affect children's English language development. It had no impact at all, but what it did is it slowed children's vocabulary development in Spanish. And it's not surprising. If you're not hearing Spanish at home as much, your vocabulary's not going to grow as quickly.

And what we also found, though, is for those moms who continue to use Spanish over those three years that had absolutely no affect on children's English language abilities. It did not slow it at all, which is often what individuals have concerns about, but what it did is it promoted children's Spanish vocabulary development.

And so our reasons for why we're thinking about this is that children get the message that Spani...that English is the language that they need to know. They hear it at Head Start, they hear it when they go out from their communities so...and they're getting so much exposure to English in the communities that what moms are doing isn't really having that much effect on their English abilities.

But because they don't hear those native languages outside of the home a lot of times, if they don't...if they're not exposed to that home language, they're going to lose it. They're not going to grow like we want them to. So. Number seven. Language of instruction affects children's language and literacy development. And what we really haven't done is we really don't have a lot of information about different models for teaching bilingual children, unfortunately.

A lot of the times the models are English immersion in which children go into Head Starts and they are learning English and that's the language of instruction with maybe some support in their native language. But more and more people are moving to dual language programs, which means that there are children who are...who are English monolingual children in the classroom and Spanish monolingual or dual language learners in the classroom.

And so language...the children are both taught in English and then they're taught in Spanish but they're separate, kind of, units and chunks of time where English is the primary language of instruction and Spanish is the primary language of instruction. And this...there is one study that I was able to find that compared the outcomes of children in these two types of programs, or preschoolers in these two types of programs. What they found is there's no difference in children's English development.

They were doing well in both cases, but children's vocabulary development really occurred when children were being instructed in Spanish and so they were able to maintain and kind of build on their knowledge of...of Spanish. So what does this mean for us for assessment? We need to realize that children are making gains, or should be making gains, in their English language and literacy during preschool.

Once again, one of my kind of take-home messages: We need to support the first language in order for that...that development to continue to occur. So if you're assessing the child's first language and even if you're doing this by talking to parents, what you need to remember is that this may be slowed – their development may be slow if they're not receiving instruction in Spanish. So keep that in mind, that's part of that changing language environment. And my final point here... [Off camera: Thank you]

...is that dual language learners cannot have a language disorder only in one language. And that's often a concern, or often referrals -- this child isn't learning English, so let's refer them to the speech pathologist and see if this child has a language disorder. What I want you to remember is learning two languages is not a disorder, it does not cause a disorder. So if a child has a language disorder, it will also be showing up in their first language.

If they don't have a language disorder, you will not s...it will...where did my sentence go there? Let me...let me try this again.

But if they have a disorder in Spanish, you'll see it in English. If they don't have a disorder in Spanish or their first language, you will not see it in English. So what this means for assessment, then, is it's important to develop and gather information about the children's abilities in both languages because without that knowledge and talking to the parents about whether or not their concerns in the first language, you won't be able to accurately determine whether or not there's a language impairment there.

And so what you want to do is monitor children's abilities over time. And if you're not...if you're concerned about this, what you want to do is you want to give the child time to learn English.

You want to monitor those children's abilities over time and maybe what it is – if the child's doing fine at home and the parent doesn't have any concerns and the child is speaking like other children in the family then you probably have to think, "Huh. What are my language models like for this child? Am I aiming too high? Do I need to kind of come down to the child's language learning abilities?" But please remember there needs to be a disorder in that first language.

I had a speech pathologist come to me, and I hate using this example because I'm a speech pathologist and it only gives us a bad name, but she was telling me about a child who was so behind in English and he had a disorder in English and she wanted to know my opinion about this and I said, "Well did you talk to mom about Spanish?" And she kind of, you know, avoided that.

But she was trying to tell me, "But look. Now this child...now that he's been in therapy with me is just taking off and doing this wonderful thing." And she literally was backing away from me as I was telling her, "Well maybe then this child doesn't have a disorder. Maybe the child just needs time to learn English." So she really wanted to take the credit but really what it is is this child probably did not have a disorder.

So let's kind of pull this all together and summarize what we've learned today or talked about today. So remember dual language learners cannot be compared to monolinguals. We shouldn't expect that they're going to be learning the same...at the same rate, but they do catch up to monolinguals so we need to give them time to catch up. Also remember that there's going to be differences in the children's language development depending upon when they've been exposed to the two languages.

But also remember that Spanish native language abilities are very important, they help children learn that second language. Children build on that first language knowledge and transfer that over so home language usage does not hurt children's English language development. And also remember that if a child does not have a language disorder in their first language, they do not have a disorder in English.

So, when we're assessing children, as you go on to your breakout sessions and you think about how you're going to modify, build on what you're already doing, remember what you'll be doing is collecting information about the child's performance in the classroom. If the child doesn't know...if you don't know, excuse me, the child's first language, employ a classroom assistant or a staff member who's fluent in that first language to help you with that assessment. Include the family as part of this assessment.

Gather background information about the languages spoken by the child and family, the ages that they were spoken to the child and the amount and consistency of exposure. We talked about the various factors that may affect this. But if you're being....as you're talking to parents also get their opinions about the child's vocabulary in their first language. Get examples of the longest utterances or longest sentences that they produce -- their longest questions that they produce.

What are things the child understands? What are things the child doesn't have...has difficulty understanding? How does that parent compare that child to other children who are...have similar characteristics? That can provide you with a lot of knowledge. Parents know about their children.

If you just simply say, "Oh well tell me about your child's language development," they're not exactly going to know,

but what you want to do is provide them with specific questions and ask for specific examples and then you can interpret what that information means. And then we want to assess the children's ability over time. DLL's are...abilities are changing.

Their exposure, their language-learning environment is changing, so you need to do this on an ongoing basis, not just at the beginning, at the end of the year. It's too late. If they're only in Head Start two...one year and you find out at the end of the Head Start they haven't made a lot of progress, it's too late. So we've got to keep monitoring over time. And I know that assessment often doesn't have, you know, the best term. "Oh...I've got to assess now." But assessment is really your friend. Assessment will really help you.

It will help you determine what children's needs are in the classroom. If the child's not making progress then you have to think, "Hm...am I aiming too high? Am I aiming too low for this particular child?" and address what you're doing.

Think about what you're doing with language in the classroom. Maybe you need to be more complex with your language and when you're talking to a particular child. So you're using your information from the assessment to maximize what you're doing in the classroom. So thank you very much. [Applause]

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