

Literature Review on Training Early Childhood Teachers in Dual Language Classrooms

Psychological research suggests that integrating teacher-child interactions, quality instruction, and evidence-based curricula and assessments into teacher preparation and professional development is likely to enhance child outcomes and improve teaching practices, particularly when reinforced by ongoing professional learning and continuous coaching (Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education. 2019). In the context of multilingual early childhood education (ECE), Zepeda et al. (2011) identified six key areas that ECE teacher training should address:

1. Language development;
2. The relationship between language and culture;
3. The skills and abilities to effectively teach Dual Language Learners (DLLs);
4. The use assessments meaningfully for Dual Language Learners (DLLs);
5. How to work with families; and
6. Cultivating a sense of professionalism.

Several studies have supported and reinforced these aspects through both empirical and theoretical investigations and areas 1-5 are explored further below. This literature review summarizes findings from 43 articles.

Based on recommendations from national policy organizations such as Child Trends, National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation of the Administration for Children and Families (OPRE), promising training models for ECE teachers include [My Teaching Partner](#), [Making the Most of Classroom Interactions \(or CLASS Group Coaching\)](#), [Early Ed U](#), [Head Start REDI](#), and [Every Child Ready](#) (Connors-Tadros & Daily, 2018). These models provide frameworks for improving teacher practices and child outcomes by focusing on effective interactions, instructional support, and the integration of evidence-based strategies in early childhood education.

Key areas of focus in ECE teacher preparation

1. Language development

ECE teachers should have a thorough understanding of language development, particularly for dual language learners (DLLs). Understanding language development is essential for implementing effective instructional strategies that support both native and English language acquisition (Restrepo & Towle-Harmon, 2008). For example, explicit vocabulary instruction within thematic units can help bridge language learning gaps (Restrepo & Towle-Harmon, 2008).

In multilingual ECE classrooms, teachers should adapt their translinguaging practices (i.e. leveraging students' entire linguistic repertoire and switching between languages in teaching) to the specific language context and the linguistic behaviors of the children, ensuring that their language choices are both responsive to and supportive of the children's learning (Machado, 2017; Flynn et al., 2019; Wagner, 2021). For instance, during a show-and-tell activity, teachers can maintain and model the use of Spanish while also integrating English, or vice versa, thereby valuing children's authentic language practices and enhancing their understanding of language functions across different contexts (Sembiente et al., 2022).

2. The relationship between language and culture

Understanding the relationship between language and culture is crucial in multilingual early childhood education (Brillante & Nemeth, 2017; Edyburn et al., 2019). Guided by the Culturally and Linguistically Responsive (CLR) approach, ECE teacher training should focus on cultivating an inclusive teaching vision that embraces dual language learners and fosters broader, more affirming beliefs about these students (Villegas et al., 2018). To teach dual language learners effectively, teachers need expertise in the subject being taught, but also an understanding of how language functions within that subject or skill development area (Villegas et al., 2018). This includes learning about children's home languages and understanding how home languages are integral to their identity and engagement with the world, as well as facilitating discussions about multilingualism with their families (Wagner, 2021). Additionally, teacher training should emphasize the importance of contextual and real-life learning, guiding teachers to connect educational content with children's real-world experiences, thereby making learning more relevant and engaging (Connors-Tadros & Daily, 2018).

Research suggests that in classrooms with children that speak both English and Spanish, bullying and teasing of the Spanish speakers is more likely to occur when the teacher does not speak any Spanish (Chang et al., 2007). Early-literacy interventions that incorporate explicit instruction, curriculum adaptations, interactive reading, and routines-based approaches were most effective when they were linguistically and culturally responsive (Larson et al., 2020). Positive outcomes are more common when early-literacy interventions include linguistic adaptations, particularly in Spanish, and address cultural relevance (Larson et al., 2020). Therefore, ECE teachers should be trained to support or encourage the use of home languages, even in bilingual classrooms, promoting a more holistic understanding of language as a tool rather than strictly separating language systems (Morales & Rumenapp, 2017; Herrera et al., 2022).

As noted by Restrepo & Towle-Harmon (2008) and Sembiante et al. (2022), combining first and second languages to promote vocabulary development in both languages is highly beneficial. Researchers found more similarities than differences between English and Spanish in phonological awareness (PA), oral language (OL), and alphabet knowledge (AK) in bilingual preschool-age children (Wackerle-Hollman et al., n.d.).

Teachers should provide opportunities for children to maintain and develop their home languages while also learning English, which can involve teaching key phrases or "survival words" (Education Development Center, n.d.) and structured activities that alternate between languages or bilingual materials that reinforce learning in both languages simultaneously (Edyburn et al., 2019). To help monolingual teachers support teachers, Brillante & Nemeth's (2017) research overview suggests that teachers include bilingual books into their classroom libraries, or ask parents to record a story in a child's home language to share with the classroom. Supporting home language is associated with enhanced Spanish expressive vocabulary and quantitative reasoning skills in English, particularly in classrooms with a higher proportion of dual language learners (Partika et al., 2011). Similarly, Méndez et al. (2015) found that Latina/Latino children who receive instruction using the Culturally and Linguistically Responsive (CLR) approach achieve significantly higher post-test scores in both Spanish and English vocabulary tests compared to those receiving English-only instruction, unaffected by children's gender or their baseline vocabulary levels.

3. The skills and abilities to effectively teach Dual Language Learners

Instructional skills.

Preschool dual language learners benefit most from interactive, content-rich shared book reading (NCELA, 2020). Research has shown that the "didactic constructor" narrative style, where teachers actively elicit narrative contributions from children during activities like wordless book sharing, leads to the best outcomes in children's print-related, language, and storytelling skills by the end of the preschool years (Schick, 2014). Teachers' use of cognitively challenging talk (e.g., language includes analysis of characters or events, predictions, recall of extended chunks of information, text-reader links and vocabulary analysis) is also helpful for Latina/Latino dual language learners, as it contributes to language and storytelling development among these preschoolers (Schick, 2014). Additionally, Finders et al. (2023) found that interventions focusing on conversational interactions, such as dialogic reading, have the highest potential to foster vocabulary development. Instructional strategies that facilitate communication and sustain children's engagement in conversations are the strongest predictors of vocabulary growth from preschool to kindergarten (Finders et al., 2023).

In addition, to enhance communication with preschool dual language learners, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC; Nemeth & Brillante, 2011) suggests strategies such as speaking slowly, avoiding slang, simplifying sentences, repeating key words, and using nonverbal cues. Increasing smaller group and one-on-one interactions, assigning language buddies, and maintaining a predictable schedule can help dual language learners participate effectively and learn (Nemeth & Brillante, 2011). Regarding questioning strategies, Buckley et al. (2023) found that closed-response and single-word-response questions are key in supporting Spanish-English children's language use during whole-group instruction, while Guiberson & Ferris (2019) highlighted the effectiveness of asking open-ended questions when modeling behaviors. It is essential to consider the context and purpose when choosing between these strategies.

Scaffolding.

Preschool dual language learners also gain from direct vocabulary instruction that offers scaffolding. Scaffolding learning support should be tailored to each child's skill level during discussions. Teachers should adapt their language scaffolding to help children engage with descriptive discourse, guiding them from concrete features of objects to more abstract, complex, context-independent past experiences that interest to them (Sembianti et al., 2022; McCabe et al., 2013). Xu et al. (2022) incorporated teacher-scaffolded instruction into reciprocal peer interactions to enhance English language and literacy skills among preschool Spanish-speaking English learners. In this approach, social interactions play a key role in supporting language and literacy development (Kim, 2015).

Children's empowerment.

In classrooms that are instructionally supportive, offer high emotional support, and avoid excessive management, children—regardless of language status—tend to develop stronger language and literacy skills (Reilly et al., 2020). Introducing new languages can inspire curiosity and a desire to learn, and teachers should respect and support children's language choices (Wagner, 2021). Creating an environment where students feel comfortable and empowered to use all of their languages involves making the use of multiple languages routine and meaningful in the classroom. Professional development for teachers should focus on balancing between child-initiated and teacher-directed activities to build specific skills. For example, Story Circles, a child-led storytelling activity where small groups of children share stories weekly and a teacher acts as a facilitator, has proven to be particularly effective for DLLs (Flynn et al., 2019).

Social-emotional learning and behavior management.

ECE teacher preparation should include training on differentiating behavior management strategies to address both language and disability-related needs. Visual aids can help students who do not speak the language understand what is coming next (Brillante & Nemeth, 2017). The American Psychological Association (Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education, 2019) emphasizes the significance of play-based learning in ECE. They suggest teacher-training programs focus on how to integrate play into the curriculum effectively, as it is crucial for supporting cognitive, social, and emotional development. Beyond play, teachers benefit from training on differentiated instruction to help them tailor their approaches to meet the diverse needs of young learners, including various learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and developmental stages.

Malloy (2019) found that the relationship between peer relationships, teacher social-emotional support, and dual language learners' social behavior is complex and context-dependent. While the concentration of shared-language peers generally did not affect dual language learners' social behavior, it influenced problem behavior based on the level of teacher support. In Malloy's study, in classrooms with more teacher support, having more shared-language peers led to increased problem behavior (the supportive environment might inadvertently encourage disruptive behavior); conversely, in environments with less teacher social-emotional support, a higher concentration of Spanish-speaking peers resulted in fewer problem behaviors (students might be relying on their shared-language peers to fill the gap in support). Teachers might indirectly support students by fostering interactions among classmates who share a home language and being trained to enhance socially and emotionally beneficial peer interactions (Malloy, 2019).

The four-tiered Pyramid Model was developed at the Center for the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning and the technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention. It offers a structured approach to developing social competence. Brillante & Nemeth's (2017) research overview apply the model to bilingual preschool classrooms. The model integrates various coordinated supports—such as special education, language development, content learning, and behavioral interventions—into a "whole child" approach, addressing children's behavior holistically. Specifically, the focus of each of the four tiers is:

- **Tiers 1 & 2:** Creating nurturing relationships and high-quality environments.
- **Tier 3:** Providing targeted supports, such as social skills instruction and Social Stories in the child's home language, to prevent challenging behaviors.
- **Tier 4:** Offering individualized, comprehensive support, starting with a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) to address persistent behaviors and teach new, positive behaviors, especially for bilingual children with disabilities (Brillante & Nemeth, 2017).

Within tier 4, an evidence-based behavioral intervention is **Functional Communication Training** (FCT; Durán et al., 2016; Franzone, 2009, as cited by Brillante & Nemeth, 2017). FCT identifies what a child is trying to communicate through challenging behaviors. It then teaches them to use conventional forms of communication like pointing, picture exchange, signing, or verbalizations. These alternative communication methods are tailored to the child's developmental needs and language barriers (Mancil et al., 2006, as cited by Brillante & Nemeth, 2017). It is essential for teachers to consider and adapt to the ethnic and cultural differences of the children and their families to ensure the effectiveness of FCT (Brillante & Nemeth, 2017).

Evidence-based bilingual ECE Interventions.

To implement bilingual ECE practices effectively, teachers need to learn about evidence-based interventions that address unique challenges faced by children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Regarding pre-literacy development, among the interventions with strong evidence of effectiveness, the **Nuestros Niños program** stands out for its demonstrated success in improving early literacy and phonological awareness skills in young children (Crowe et al., 2021). Other promising interventions include the **Literacy Express Preschool Curriculum**, **Shared Storybook Reading**, and the **Focused Stimulation Approach**, all of which show potential benefits for various aspects of language and literacy development in both bilingual and monolingual contexts (Crowe et al., 2021). Additionally, the **SPELL (Structured Preschool Efforts in Language and Literacy)** program, a cost-effective, twice-weekly storybook-based intervention, has proven effective in enhancing early literacy skills among preschoolers, benefiting both bilingual/immigrant children and native speakers, regardless of their home literacy environment (Dale et al., 2018). **A mixed application of interventions might be helpful:** Spanish-speaking children made significant gains from pre- to post-test after receiving a combination of Head Start and Early Reading First interventions (Han et al., 2024).

4. The use of assessments meaningfully for Dual Language Learners (DLLs)

ECE teachers need training in bilingual and biliteracy assessment and should adopt an assets-based instructional approach that utilizes the linguistic and cultural resources of multilingual children (Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education, 2019). The selection of assessment tools should be based on the needs of dual language learners rather than relying on an overly didactic, English-centric model that does not address the diverse needs of this growing population (Herrera et al., 2022). Teachers are expected to be skilled in utilizing assessment tools and monitor progress frequently by analyzing children's performance, documenting achievements, and identifying patterns in learning data to make informed pedagogical decisions (Villegas et al., 2018).

To measure children's behavioral functions and outcomes, Lonigan et al. (2016) utilized various **b** tasks and behavioral assessment tools. To assess executive function, several tasks were used to measure children's inhibitory control and working memory. For inhibitory control, the Knock-Tap, Picture-Imitation, and Day-Night task measurements were employed to evaluate children's ability to inhibit initial responses, self-correct, and respond accurately. For working memory, tasks like Size-Ordering, Word-Span-Reversed, Listening-Span, and Animal-Span measurements were utilized. These tasks challenged children to recall and organize information presented to them in specific sequences.

Children's **behavioral self-regulation** can be measured using the Head-Toes-Knees-Shoulders (HTKS) task, which tested their ability to follow commands in an opposite manner (e.g., touching toes when instructed to touch their head). This task can be administered in both English and Spanish, providing insights into their self-regulation, attention, and ability to self-correct. Additionally, teachers may complete structured behavior rating scales in their classrooms, such as the Strengths and Weaknesses of ADHD-Symptoms and Normal-Behaviors Rating Scale (SWAN), Conners' Teacher Ratings Scale (CTRS-15), and Social Competence and Behavior Evaluation (SCBE). These scales evaluate children's attention, hyperactivity, impulsivity, social competence, anger/aggression, and anxiety, providing a comprehensive view of their behavioral functioning.

In addition, assessment should go beyond evaluating language literacy and behavioral outcomes to include **language environment assessments** that document current practices and help develop strategies to enhance interactions (Finders et al., 2023). Comprehensive assessment skills are essential, and teacher training should equip teachers with the ability

to understand the results of various assessment tools to track and support children's development, integrate findings into instructional practices, and provide targeted support based on assessment results (NCELA, 2020; Connors-Tadros & Daily, 2018).

5. How to work with families

In multilingual ECE programs, viewing parents as resources and developing effective family engagement is crucial. It should be one of the focuses of teacher training (Herrera et al., 2022). Teachers need to be equipped to address various barriers—economic, cultural, educational, and linguistic—that may limit parental involvement (Restrepo & Towle-Harmon, 2008). Teacher training should emphasize building strong home-school connections by supporting families in areas they are interested in, such as offering resources to help children perform better in school and manage concentration (Mendez et al., 2023), and by recognizing the resilience of families despite systemic inequities (Mendez et al., 2023). Additionally, valuing and incorporating children's home languages and cultures into the classroom requires promoting meaningful partnerships with families and communities (NCELA, 2020; EDC, 2019). This includes inviting family members and community participants to engage in classroom activities that reflect the home language. Adopting an assets-based approach that leverages the strengths of children's home languages and cultures will foster positive family engagement. NAEYC recommends that teachers should make efforts to understand DLL families to help children feel more comfortable and supported in their learning environment (Nemeth & Brillante, 2011).

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