

Myths and Research About Early Bilingual Development

Myths	Helpful Excerpts from the Research
<p>Myth #1: Learning two languages confuses children.</p>	<p>“Based on this recent research from cognitive neuroscientists, we now know that from the earliest days of life, human babies have an extensive and innate capacity to hear, process, and learn multiple languages. In fact, even the youngest babies are able to sort into separate language categories the unique phonology (sounds) of each language perceived, and by the preschool years, bilingual children are skilled in interpreting contextual cues to direct their utterances in the appropriate language to the appropriate person (Byers-Heinlein, Burns and Werker 2010; Kuhl et al. 2006). Additional research has concluded that during the last trimester of pregnancy, fetuses are actively processing the unique characteristics of different languages and beginning to make distinctions among them (Conboy 2013). “</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Improving Education for Multilingual Students, Chapter 4 (2020), pg. 198</i> <p>“There is no evidence to indicate that the use of two languages in the home or the use of one in the home and another in an early care and education (ECE) setting confuses ELs/DLLs or puts the development of one or both of their languages at risk. Given adequate exposure to two languages, young children have the capacity to develop competence in both. Children who are given the opportunity to develop competence in two or more languages early in life benefit from their capacity to communicate in more than one language and may show enhancement of certain cognitive skills, as well as improved academic outcomes in school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>NASEM Report Research Brief (2017) pg. 2</i>
<p>Myth #2: Developing Language and Literacy in their home language will hinder children's development of English</p>	<p>“Research findings demonstrate that proficiency in a first language promotes literacy and school achievement in a second language (Cárdenas-Hagán & Carlson, 2007; Collier & Thomas, 2017; Lindholm Leary, 2012). The effect is greatest when initial literacy exposure and instruction occur in the child’s dominant language, where they have the strongest base of oral language and where text will have the strongest meaning. Children who are learning English as a new language are more likely to become readers and writers of English when they are already familiar with the vocabulary and concepts in their primary language. Effective literacy approaches ensure that children maintain their home language while learning to speak and read English. Such approaches include non-English materials and resources in the</p>

	<p>classroom to support the home language of dual language learners while they also acquire oral proficiency and begin to engage with text in English.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <u>Early Literacy Development and Instruction for Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Education (2022), pg. 13</u>
<p>Myth #3: English is the only language necessary for success</p>	<p>“When language shift and language loss occur, it is more than just the home language that is lost. Language loss also includes loss of culture and family bonds and has a long-term impact on a child’s identity, socio-emotional wellbeing, and academic success. According to Genesee, Paradis, & Crago (2011), “Erasing a child’s language or cultural patterns of language use is a great loss for the child. Children’s identities and sense of self are inextricably linked to the language they speak and the cultures into which they have been socialized. Even at an early age, they are speakers of their languages and members of their cultures. Language and culture are essential to children’s identities” (p. 33). These include their identities as literate learners. Therefore, literacy development must be informed by their home literacy practices and encompass the child’s sociocultural, linguistic, cognitive, and academic dimensions. (Herrera et al., 2015). Lily Wong Fillmore’s (1991) seminal research with immigrant families documented the damaging disruption to family dynamics when children are denied culturally and linguistically responsive schooling. Instruction that furthers a monocultural and monolingual perspective on learning increases the potential of the child losing the home language and the advantages of bilingualism for education and beyond, including literacy (Escamilla et al., 2018; Montanari et al., 2016), cognition (Bialystock, 2001), high school persistence (Rumbaut, 2014), matriculation to four-year colleges (Santibañez & Zárate, 2014), and family cohesion (Portes & Hao, 2002).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <u>Early Literacy Development and Instruction for Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Education (2022), pg. 7</u> <p>“Bilingualism offers cognitive, social, and economic benefits. Children who grow up bilingual have more job opportunities, broader social networks, and closer connections to family and heritage. Development of the home language in addition to English is critical because it contributes to growth in both English and the child’s home language and provides life-long benefits. A child’s home language is a crucial foundation for cognitive development, learning about the world, and emerging literacy. The use and development of a student’s home language and affirmation of family culture increases academic achievement, promotes a sense of belonging and connection to school, positively affects family relationships and inter-generational communication, and increases confidence and motivation.”</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Questions & Answers- Dual Language Learners in Preschool (2021), pg. 2</i>
<p>Myth #4 English Immersion is the best way for a child to learn English</p>	<p>“Research has shown that instructional use of the home language—often referred to as bilingual education—does not hinder or stunt academic progress in English. On the contrary, there is evidence that teaching children to read in their home language can support their literacy development in English. In other words, when we systematically provide learning experiences in children’s home languages along with learning experiences in English, we promote home language development without hampering English development (Lightbown and Spada 2006). Five meta-analyses of bilingual education in elementary school have reached this conclusion (Goldenberg 2012). The most recent study has found that by the end of elementary school, children who have been in a bilingual program since kindergarten had much stronger Spanish skills, with no differences in English skills, compared with children who had been in an English immersion program (Slavin et al. 2011). Similar results have been found for preschoolers: Classroom use of both the first language and English leads to improvement in first-language skills and at least equivalent English language skills in comparison with children in all-English contexts (e.g., Barnett et al. 2007; Rodríguez et al. 1995; Winsler et al. 1999). Dual language preschool programming thus confers the simultaneous benefits of maintaining and developing the home language while promoting English proficiency (Farver et al. 2009). In other words, bilingual education in preschool is additive rather than subtractive (Winsler et al. 1999), meaning that children benefit from a net linguistic gain: They maintain and develop their first language while beginning to acquire English skills. Home-language development does not appear to come at the cost of developing English skills. In sum, bilingual programs help students become bilingual—something that is valuable linguistically, cognitively (Bialystok 2001), and eventually economically (Saiz and Zoido 2005)”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>California's Best Practices for Young Dual Language Learners Research Overview Papers (2013), pg. 98</i> <p>“Language researchers have estimated that in order for preschoolers to learn to speak a language, children must spend between 20 and 30 percent of their waking hours hearing and speaking the language (Pearson et al. 1997). In classrooms that score high on generic measures of quality (as measured by the CLASS, which we will address in more detail later in this paper), Spanish-speaking children’s academic skills (in both English or Spanish) were higher when they received more instruction in Spanish (Burchinal et al. 2012). In a recent summary of related research, Espinosa (2010) concluded that the best evidence available points to the value of early</p>

	<p>reading instruction in the home language and in English contributing to successful reading development in English. Espinosa goes on to describe other studies of programs that used a 50-50 English–Spanish bilingual approach with young learners and found that young children were able to develop English skills on par with their monolingual English-speaking peers while also continuing to develop their Spanish skills (Barnett et al. 2007; Rodríguez et al. 1995; Winsler et al. 1999). High-quality bilingual preschool instruction appears to support development in both the home language and in English.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>California's Best Practices for Young Dual Language Learners Research Overview Papers (2013), pg. 100</i>
<p>Myth #5: Children will maintain their home language at home while they learn English at school.</p>	<p>“Often, when preschool DLLs are introduced to English in the preschool setting and it is the main language of instruction, they start to prefer to speak only English and become reluctant to use their home language (Oller and Eilers 2002; Wong Fillmore 1991). Early loss of a child’s first or home language is associated with long-term language difficulties as well as the risk of becoming estranged from their cultural and linguistic heritage (NASEM 2017). When children can no longer communicate with their parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other extended family in the language of their home and community, they risk losing their sense of identity and connections to their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage. In order to prevent the early loss of home language skills, successful ECE educators actively support, intentionally promote, and frequently monitor DLLs’ growth in their home language as well as in English. The goal of achieving high levels of English language proficiency should not come at the expense of continued development of a DLL’s home language. Preschool DLLs with a strong foundation in their home language and high levels of English proficiency thrive in a global, multilingual world while maintaining and sustaining strong bonds with their immediate and extended families.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Improving Education for Multilingual Students, Chapter 4 (2020), pg. 203</i>
<p>Myth #6: Dual Language Learners have more language delays than their monolingual peers</p>	<p>“Research from the 1950s seemed to indicate that children learning two languages acquired language more slowly than monolingual children and achieved smaller vocabularies, but oftentimes vocabulary was measured only in English, and a spate of other variables co-occurred with language status, including socioeconomic status (SES) and schooling. In more recent studies when such variables are controlled for, no differences are found between bilinguals and monolinguals (Bialystok 2010; Romaine 2004). This finding suggests that SES and schooling, rather than dual language learning, contributed to children’s smaller vocabulary size. Similarly, even today,</p>

children are told to “speak one language” by well-meaning but uninformed adults (De Houwer 2009). the well-documented and widely publicized achievement gap between DLLs and native English speakers is sometimes taken as evidence that dual language learning must negatively affect cognition. However, when factors such as SES and school of attendance are controlled for, the achievement gap is greatly diminished (Crosnoe and Turley 2011; U.S. Department of Education, NCES 2001).”

- [*California's Best Practices for Young Dual Language Learners Research Overview Papers \(2013\), pg. 53-54*](#)

DLLs show language gaps in English beginning in infancy, likely due largely to many DLLs having fewer opportunities to learn English (Fuller et al. 2015). DLLs also perform significantly below their English-only peers on measures of kindergarten readiness and have much lower English reading and math scores at third grade. However, this gap seems to be associated with a lack of English proficiency rather than with bilingualism itself. Those DLLs who achieve some level of English proficiency on measures of kindergarten readiness often perform as well as or better than their English-only peers on third-grade reading and math assessments. ECE educators can realize the potential of DLLs when they understand the benefits of early bilingualism and adopt more effective strategies for building on the linguistic and cognitive strengths of DLLs.

- [*Improving Education for Multilingual Students, Chapter 4 \(2020\), pg. 193*](#)