

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Supporting English Learners in Preschool: Strategies for Teachers

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This research to practice paper summarizes a study of *Supporting Preschoolers with Language Differences* (SPLD), a professional development (PD) program aimed at building the capacity of preschool teachers to support the language and literacy development of young English learners (ELs). It describes practical strategies and approaches included in the program that all preschool teachers can use- formative assessment, specific language-support strategies, and adaptations to classroom activities- to promote EL children's oral language, receptive language, and pre-literacy skills.

Keywords: early childhood; preschool; language learning; ELS

Over the past ten years the numbers of children learning English in addition to another home language has risen by almost 60% in the United States (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & McLaughlin, 2008). English Learners (ELs) now comprise about 30% of the population of Head Start classrooms (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2013). Throughout their school years these children will face challenges that have the potential to limit their English vocabulary development, negatively impact their later reading ability, and make them increasingly vulnerable to underachievement and dropping out as they approach the high school years (Ballantyne et al., 2008; Capps et al., 2005). Research clearly shows that all young children, including ELs, need high-quality language and literacy instruction. They need opportunities to hear and use language; explore words and sounds; interact around books and print; and apply emerging reading and writing skills (Dickinson & Neuman, 2006; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). EL children, however, have additional language needs (Haager & Windmueller, 2001). They require targeted supports for building vocabulary and increased opportunities to hear and use language. They need teachers who actively facilitate their participation in play and other classroom activities and who help them establish the types of social relationships with other children that promote language learning.

In order to effectively support ELs, teachers need to understand the nature of second language development. They need to know, for example, that when young

children are introduced to two languages *sequentially* rather than *simultaneously*, the first language provides a foundation for learning the second (Tabors, 2008). Teachers also need to understand that EL children are not a homogenous group, but unique individuals who bring a variety of background experiences to the language learning process (Espinosa, 2008).

Research shows that teachers benefit from professional development (PD) that centers on EL language development and on the practices teachers can learn and use with ELs in their own classrooms. These practices include specific strategies for supporting EL children's language directly as well as pedagogical approaches for promoting a language-rich classroom culture and for addressing the language needs of individual ELs (Santos, Darling-Hammond, & Cheuk, 2012). Effective PD also supports teachers to try out new practices, observe children's responses, and reflect on their own teaching (Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Webster-Wright, 2009). Teachers benefit when PD includes work with a knowledgeable coach who can observe the teacher trying out new practices, engage the teacher in joint reflection, and help the teacher plan responsive follow-up activities (Darling-Hammond, 2012).

THE STUDY

Supporting Children with Language Differences (SPLD) is a PD program aimed at building the capacity of preschool teachers to promote the language and literacy development of the EL children in their classrooms. SPLD incorporates three fundamental teaching practices:

- Collecting language assessment data on EL children and using the data to inform curriculum planning
- Implementing specific language support strategies with ELs throughout the day
- Grouping EL children intentionally in learning centers and during classroom activities

During this study we offered the program to 19 teachers in a large urban Head Start center. Teachers were asked to attend three full day instructional sessions, implement research-based language-support strategies and approaches in their own classrooms, and work with an onsite coach in between sessions. In order to study the effectiveness of SPLD on teachers and children, researchers conducted assessments in the 19 SPLD classrooms as well as in 16 classrooms where teachers were not participating in the program. Researchers used the *Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation Pre-K Tool* (ELLCO Pre-K; Smith, Brady, & Anastasopoulos, 2008) to collect data on the language and literacy quality of the classroom environment and teachers' instructional strategies. Researchers collected data on EL children using a variety of standardized language and literacy assessments including the *Preschool Language Scale, 4th ed.* (PLS-4; Zimmerman, Steiner, & Pond, 2002). In order to better understand the process through which SPLD impacted teacher practice, researchers also conducted a case study of Grace, an SPLD teacher, as she worked with Maria, an EL child in her

classroom. We have used examples from the case study in this paper to illustrate SPLD teaching strategies and approaches.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Collecting language assessment data on EL children and using the data to inform curriculum planning

In SPLD teachers collected data about children's language and literacy development from multiple sources including EL children's families and teachers' own observations. Grace interviewed Maria's mother at the beginning of the school year and asked questions such as *What language(s) does your child's family speak at home? When did your child first begin communicating in English?* and *In what settings does your child use the home language and/or English?* Grace used her own Head Start home visit form as well as the *Family Language Questionnaire* (Tabors, 2008) for guidance. In the classroom Grace collected data on Maria's receptive and expressive language use. Grace kept a *running record* of the words that Maria responded to and/or used in daily classroom activities and conversations. When Grace reflected on this assessment data she was surprised to learn that the classroom was Maria's only English-learning environment and that Maria knew and used fewer words than Grace had previously believed. This information led her to choose Maria as her focus child in the program. SPLD teachers also had access to data from the standardized language and literacy assessments that were given to EL children as part of the research study. With support from their coaches, teachers used all of these data sources to plan ongoing language and literacy goals and experiences for EL children that were responsive to their individual language needs. Specific knowledge of individual children's language levels also enabled teachers to adjust the ways in which they introduced and facilitated classroom activities to make them more accessible to ELs.

Implementing specific language support strategies with ELs throughout the day

In SPLD teachers learned a set of language support strategies and used them with EL children consistently and intentionally throughout the classroom day. Although these strategies apply to teachers' work with all young children, they are especially critical for ELs. These seven strategies support ELs' language and vocabulary development directly, make learning activities more accessible to ELs, and scaffold ELs' participation in the social life of the classroom (Tabors, 2008). Each of them is described below using examples drawn from the case study of Grace.

Adjust your own language to meet the needs of individual EL children. When teachers use language that meets the needs of individual EL children, they make classroom conversations accessible to ELs and create opportunities for introducing appropriately challenging new words. During a dramatic play restaurant scenario, for example, Grace narrated Maria's actions by saying *Maria is getting the corn, Maria is*

serving the corn, and this corn is delicious! By using the familiar word *corn* and short repetitive sentences, Grace was able to focus Maria's attention on the new words *servicing* and *delicious*.

Restate and reframe comments and questions. When teachers restate and reframe comments and questions, they provide EL children with additional language clues that help children understand key words and phrases. For example, Grace reframed a question for Maria when she asked her *Are you going to set the table now? Are you going to put the plates and cups on the table now?* Grace also restated other children's comments to Maria. When a child said to Maria *Give me the green one* during a painting activity, Grace said *Maria, Haley is asking you for the green paint.*

Provide word definitions in context. When teachers provide simple definitions of new words *in context*, they provide children with environmental clues that support children's understanding of key words and phrases. For example, Grace defined the word *squeeze* in context of a science experiment. Grace showed Maria how to squeeze a plastic bottle to move different objects with air. She also defined the word *squeeze* in context when she said to Grace: *You have to squeeze the bottle hard; to squeeze means to press.*

Scaffold oral language with pictures, props, and body language. When teachers communicate the meanings of words using pictures, props, and body language, they provide clues in addition to language and contextual clues. For example, as Grace defined the word *squeeze* in context, she also held up her fists, squeezed them hard, and dramatically scrunched up her face to emphasize the physical effort she was making. Grace routinely used picture cues on classroom charts. On the classroom *Rules* chart, for example, she placed photos of children demonstrating each of the rules.

Observe and interpret children's behavior and provide relevant vocabulary. When teachers closely observe children's behavior, they can narrate the child's actions and introduce or reinforce relevant vocabulary. Grace did this when she said *Maria is getting the corn* and *Maria is serving the corn* during the restaurant activity. When teachers observe children closely, they also have opportunities to interpret children's ideas and questions and provide relevant language. For example, Grace noticed Maria looking around the art area during a painting activity and she said *It looks like you are trying to find more paint. What color are you looking for?*

Follow up to check for understanding. When teachers follow up to assess children's understanding of new words, they can identify any misunderstandings children have and, if necessary, provide additional language clues. Teachers may follow-up immediately, by observing the child's response to a comment or question, or during a subsequent activity. Grace assessed Maria's understanding of vocabulary introduced during restaurant play in the morning (*plates, cups, bowls, and set the table*) by inviting Maria to set the tables at lunchtime.

Increase the complexity of your own language as children are ready. Teachers increase the complexity of their own language as children gain more fluency in

English by gradually introducing more challenging vocabulary and using longer, more complex sentences. Grace used this strategy during subsequent readings of a storybook. During the first read Grace talked with children about the words *shirt*, *pants*, *scream*, and *dirty*. During the fourth read she promoted discussion of the words *teenager*, *tight*, and *fitting room*.

Grouping EL children intentionally

EL children's social interactions impact their language development. Peers provide "comprehensible" input for ELs because children use language that is more direct, simple, and contextualized than the language used by adults (Krashen, 1981). Grace paired Maria with a number of different children during open-ended and structured activities including building, computer games, book browsing, play dough, and drawing. Grace observed that Maria was using and playing with words and sounds during these paired activities and that she was developing friendships with a number of children in the class. These interactions resulted in a *friendship book* that Grace made with Maria in order to support Maria's emerging literacy skills and acknowledge Maria's happiness about these emerging relationships. SPLD teachers also adapted routine classroom activities- including dramatic play and book reading- to better meet the needs of EL children and support their inclusion.

Adapting activities—Dramatic play supports. Dramatic play scenarios provide the concrete and familiar props that EL children need as scaffolds for language. Teachers can support ELs' language by grouping children in the dramatic play area who are at different levels of English language development and facilitating their play from the *inside* and from the *outside* (Hadley, 2002). Grace intentionally introduced sets of related words during the restaurant scenario: *plate*, *cup*, *bowl*, and *napkin*; *salad*, *vegetable*, and *meat*; and *set*, *serve*, *place*, and *order*. Grace also used complex language to describe Maria's and the other children's play behaviors (*setting the table*, *taking orders*, *cooking and serving the food*). She reinforced new vocabulary by connecting the play to children's everyday experiences (*going to a restaurant*, *observing cooking at home*, *setting the table in the classroom*). When she played the role of a customer in the restaurant, Grace supported Maria's dramatic play from the inside by *ordering a meal*, *asking for a napkin*, and *paying the bill*. She also supported play from the outside and acted as a stage manager when she suggested the roles children might play (*customer*, *waiter*, *waitress*, and *cook*), facilitated interactions between Maria and other children (*Ask Maria what they have for dessert*) and by narrating Maria's actions as Maria played the role of waitress.

Adapting activities—Book reading. A compelling story is a rich source of interesting new words, and it has the potential to provoke children's thinking and help them make language connections to personal and shared experiences. SPLD's primary adaptation to the book reading routine consisted of the teacher reading the same book multiple times with a small group of EL children. This grouping adaptation enables teachers to target the language needs of individual ELs. It also ensures that EL children

who are at a beginning level of learning English have many opportunities to participate in book conversations and not be overshadowed by their more English-fluent peers. Grace read the book *Max's Dragon Shirt* by Rosemary Wells four times to Maria and three other EL children as her coach recorded the reading on video. Over the course of four readings Grace:

- Initiated discussion of increasingly challenging words and language
- Supported children's deeper understanding of story concepts
- Gradually transferred responsibility for "reading" the story to the children

After each reading Grace and her coach used the video recording to assess Maria's understanding of the story and story vocabulary. With her coach's help Grace planned subsequent readings that were responsive to Maria's growing language and understanding. By the fourth reading Maria and the other EL children were able to act out the story as Grace leafed through each page in the book and provided cues. During a final and fifth reading, Grace read the book to the whole group as Maria and the other EL children assisted.

Adapting activities—Language helpers. "Language Helpers" is a type of peer coaching based on the idea that even very young children can be taught to support the language use of their EL peers (Hirschler, 1994). Children can be taught to initiate play and conversation, and to adjust, restate, and reframe their words if they sense they are not being understood. SPLD teachers selected language helpers based on their social maturity and their interest in interacting with other children, as well as their English language fluency. Grace actively coached another child, Haley, as a language helper for Maria. She showed Haley how to: initiate and maintain contact with Maria; ask simple questions; check for understanding; and wait for Maria's response. She then paired Maria and Haley during a painting activity and briefly coached Haley to use the language helper strategies before leaving the girls to play independently. Video taken by Grace's coach showed evidence of Maria and Haley laughing together as they appeared to jointly plan a paint-mixing trick on the teacher.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicated that SPLD was effective in building teachers' capacity to promote EL children's expressive language, receptive language, and pre-literacy skills. Teachers positively impacted the language and literacy skills of ELs in their classrooms by collecting language assessment data on EL children and using the data to inform curriculum planning; implementing specific language support strategies with ELs throughout the day; and grouping EL children intentionally in learning centers and during classroom activities. The overall findings from this study suggest that the intentional inclusion of ELs in classroom activities and a sustained emphasis on teaching strategies and approaches that support their inclusion, may be the key to promoting ELs' language success in early childhood classrooms. It also suggests that intensive PD that focuses on EL teaching and learning, and that includes onsite coaching support, may be instrumental

in providing preschool teachers with the knowledge and skills they need in order to effectively support their young EL students.

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