Young English Language Learners

Resourceful in the Classroom

Celia Genishi

Listen in on a conversation in a classroom where children are learning English as a second language (ESL). During snacktime four-year-old Tiffany asks for paper. Donna, her teacher, directs her to the writing center, but then realizes that Tiffany is not referring to writing paper.

> *Donna:* You want a paper, Tiffany?
>
> *Tiffany:* Yeah. I wipe my hand!
>
> *Donna:* You want paper to wipe your hands? What do you need?
>
> *Tiffany:* Tissue.
>
> *Donna:* OK—there are tissues behind you. Or do you mean a napkin?
>
> *Tiffany:* Napkin!
>
> *Susan (staff developer):* It's made of paper, though, isn't it, Tiffany?
>
> *Donna:* Yes, it is. A different kind of paper.
>
> *Tiffany: (holding up her napkin)* Tissue.
>
> *Donna:* The tissue's right behind you . . .
>
> *Tiffany:* That is, um, nose. This napkin is wipe hands and that is for bathroom wash hands. *(points to the roll of paper towels in the corner)*
>
> *Donna:* Paper towels! All different types of paper, right?
>
> *Tiffany:* Yup.
>
> (Genishi, Yung-Chan, & Stires 2000, 72)

This short conversation represents but a slice of what children learning a second language must figure out as they join the world of English speakers. The complexities and challenges of this social and cognitive enterprise are the focus of this article.

The number of students in the United States for whom English is a second language is large and rapidly growing. Tiffany, a member of Donna Yung-Chan's public school prekindergarten class in New York City, is one of millions in the United States whose primary or home language is not English. In Tiffany's case, her family speaks Cantonese, a Chinese dialect also spoken by her teacher and by most of her four-year-old classmates. They are among the more than two million "limited English proficient" children found among the 22 million children enrolled in public elementary schools (prekindergarten through grade six) in the United States (Macias 2000).

Census figures suggest that by the year 2025, more than half of the children enrolled in U.S. schools will be members of "minority" groups, not of European American origin (United States Bureau of the Census 1995). The largest numbers of these young people will reside in heavily populated states like California, New York, Illinois, and Texas, where new immigrants will come primarily from Asia and Latin America.

How are second language learners resourceful?

To use language at all—to speak or write or sign—in conscious awareness of another's presence is to engage in an act of connection.

— Judith Wells Lindfors, Children's Inquiry: Using Language to Make Sense of the World

In this article children whose primary or home language is not English are viewed as resourceful—not as "limited English proficient," but as "English language learners" (ELLs). Stated another way, children who are learning English begin their school lives with their "language glass" half full, not half empty.

There are powerful arguments as to why learners of any second language are resourceful and why their language glasses should be considered half full. By the time they begin

Celia Genishi, Ph.D., is professor of education and coordinator of the early childhood education program in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York. A former preschool and secondary Spanish teacher, her work has focused on children's language in the classroom, informal assessment, and collaborative research with teachers.

school, children have already used language to connect with others, even if their language is elementary (Bruner 1983; Nelson 1996). All human beings seek to make connections with others from the moment their lives begin. Children make connections to help make sense of their everyday experiences as they learn to participate in their families and communities. They use multiple ways of expressing themselves to make those connections, from crying and making faces to movements and gestures and oral language.

In typically developing children language is intertwined with cognition, emotion, and social connectedness (Bloom 1998). These aspects of the person develop as transactions occur between children's internal intentional states and their external social and physical world. Children learn much about the world through whatever language their families or caregivers use. Young children who are English

> Children who are learning English begin their school lives with their "language glass" half full, not half empty.

language learners do not wait to express their intentions or to connect with others until they encounter English in the classroom. Thus it is gravely inaccurate to view them as deficient in language. These children may be new to English, but not to expressing intentions or to knowledge of language that comes through daily experiences in the social and physical world (Genishi 1988).

Although the research on children learning multiple languages in early childhood is not extensive (especially in preschool settings), the research increasingly shows the cultural, economic, and cognitive advantages of bilingualism (Hakuta & Pease-Alvarez 1992). For example, with globalization and the growth of immigrant populations in the United States, those who are bilingual or multilingual have access to a wider range of social and cultural experiences. These extend from cultural events in languages other than

English to informal opportunities to interpret English for family members (Valdes 2001) to jobs that require the ability to speak and write English and at least one other language.

Moreover, while some monolingual adults believe children become confused by learning more than one language, researchers show this isn't necessarily so (Ben-Zeev 1977; Duncan & DeAvila 1979; Hakuta 1986; Fouser 1996/1997). Bilingual children may develop more awareness about the nature of language and how it works than monolingual children, and there is evidence that being bilingual enhances cognitive development generally. In a study of 123 Puerto Rican kindergartners and first graders, for example, researchers (Hakuta & Diaz 1985) found a positive relationship between degree of bilingualism (how able children were in both their languages) and scores on the Raven Progressive Matrices, a nonverbal test of cognitive ability. In other words, in this study being bilingual made the students smarter, according to the researchers' measures.

William K. Geiger Photography

> Although the research on children learning multiple languages in early childhood is not extensive (especially in preschool settings), the research increasingly shows the cultural, economic, and cognitive advantages of bilingualism.

English language learners in school settings

To tell you the truth, the hardest thing [about] coming to this country wasn't the winter everyone warned me about—it was the language.

— Julia Alvarez, *Yo!*

Writers like Alvarez poignantly attest that learning English as a second language can be a grueling task, a process beset with challenges. Many children with below-average performances in school are judged to have "problems with the language" and termed *limited English proficient* (August & Hakuta 1997).

Indeed learning a second language can subject the not-yet-articulate learner to public humiliation and create cultural divides between children and their families. The process of learning English is influenced in the United States by enduring and insidious social factors: prejudices against speakers of languages other than English, people of color, non-middle-class learners, accented English, and beliefs and behaviors of cultures not identifiably "American." These negative societal attitudes in turn affect the school performances of children who feel pressure to learn English and not speak the language of their family members in school.

Researchers and advocates of bilingualism (Lambert 1977; Fillmore 2000) state that in too many cases learning English does not equate with becoming bilingual. Rather the learning of English is part of a subtractive process in which learners rid themselves of their home or heritage language often within a few years, losing the benefits of bilingualism and important ties to their family and culture (Fillmore 2000). Thus, although research shows that bilingualism can be beneficial, learners who are potentially bilingual often choose to become English-only speakers. (For further discussion of language loss and attitudes toward English, see Tse 2001.)

William K. Geiger Photography

Approaches to English language learning in the classroom

Teachers who seek best practices will find a complicated mix of familial, cultural, and political factors influencing what kind of curriculum is desirable and effective for their English language learners (Cummins 1986). In addition, the many possible approaches to teaching overlap enough that it is difficult for researchers to evaluate their advantages and disadvantages. Programs generally are termed either bilingual education or English as a second language. While bilingual programs are designed to provide instruction in both the learner's primary language and English, and ESL programs are designed to provide instruction in English only, in reality the primary language *and* English are likely to be heard from children and teachers to varying degrees in both types of programs.

Zelasko and Antunez (2000) categorize bilingual programs for learners who share the same primary language in three ways:

• **two-way bilingual, bilingual immersion,** or **dual-language immersion** (terms are interchangeable)—both the primary language and English are used in all areas of the curriculum, ideally for equal amounts of time

• **late-exit** or **developmental bilingual education**—the primary language is used mostly at first, with English increasing as learners become more proficient, sometimes over a period of years

• **early-exit** or **transitional bilingual education**—primary language and English are used at first, but transition to English is rapid

The first two types of programs focus on the linguistic goal of bilingualism; the third aims toward students acquiring English as quickly as possible.

ESL programs all share the goal of English acquisition. Different types of ESL programs are

• sheltered English
• specially designed academic instruction in English
• structured immersion
• content-based ESL
• pull-out ESL

The first four program types can be used with groups of students who all share the same primary language or those who have differing language backgrounds. Each type has a slightly different focus and degree of structure, but in all four teachers

adapt English, often through nonverbal means and visual aids, so that it is appropriate for learners' levels of proficiency. The fifth type, pull-out ESL, is the most distinctive because it involves English language learners leaving their regular classroom for some part of the school day to take ESL instruction.

The differences among these many types of programs—bilingual and ESL—are often vague. Sheltered English in one school might resemble transitional bilingual in another. In addition, as greater numbers of "regular" teachers are providing instruction for English language learners, it is increasingly difficult to say which types of programs are more effective.

Since the passage of the federal Bilingual Education Act mandating bilingual programs in 1968, researchers have compared achievement results of students in bilingual programs with those who are not in such programs, despite the fuzzy boundaries between program types. (For a comprehensive and clear presentation of program evaluations, see August and Hakuta 1997, chapters 6 and 7.) Evaluative results have been mixed, with some studies declaring that bilingual education is ineffective (Dannoff 1978); some finding that transitional bilingual programs have a weak level of effectiveness (Baker & DeKanter 1981); and a few finding that bilingual programs have positive effects (Willig 1985).

Program components that work

At the opposite end of the spectrum from large-scale studies of thousands of students are small-scale case studies of individual schools and classrooms. As case studies their results are not generalizable in a statistical sense and thus do not help answer questions such as, What works best for children in

this country? This state? Or this school district? As August and Hakuta (1997) suggest, however, case studies can begin to identify components or aspects of programs that work for children in particular situations. There are few studies of early childhood settings, in or out of school, that focus on children who are English language learners—especially children in the pre-elementary school years. However, some noteworthy exceptions follow.

In their ethnographic study of a Mexican American community, Pease-Alvarez and Vasquez (1994) illustrate the benefits for young English language learners when their experiences at home overlap in a variety of ways with their experiences at school. They point out that knowing how language is used at home in children's families is an advantage for teachers who want to build on what children bring to the classroom. Yet teachers may know little about the children's histories or about the funds of knowledge that grow out of those histories; children's ways of using language and the purposes for which they use it reflect their cultural backgrounds and by extension their ways of participating in school experiences (Moll et al. 1992). Teachers may unknowingly favor particular uses of language—ways of telling stories, responding to instructions or questions, participating in groups, and so on—that are familiar to teachers' own communities but unfamiliar to some of their children.

Ballenger (1992, 1999), a teacher researcher in her preschool classroom, found that the children, their parents, and her colleagues, all of Haitian background, were

the best sources of information on the children's history and their ways of using language. These ways were clear to Ballenger, bilingual in English and Haitian-Creole, once they were pointed out to her, but changing her own classroom discourse or talk took time. For example, learning to use direct forms of reprimand to control children's behavior was a difficult change for Ballenger, but eventually it showed her and her children's families that respect for social and linguistic variations can be reciprocal. While the children were learning English, their teacher was learning aspects of a style of talk that was appropriate in the Haitian community.

Yung-Chan, the teacher in the example that opened this article, also used information from families and identified ways the children learning English participated in classroom talk and the curriculum to support their learning. She had the advantage of knowing Cantonese, the language of most of her children. Still her middle-class lifestyle differed from that of many of her children and their families who had recently immigrated from China. Yung-Chan's ability to communicate in Cantonese and frequent contact with family members provided her with information about how the children used language and whether English was spoken at home.

In her "monolingual" classroom, designated neither as ESL nor as bilingual, Yung-Chan was able to use Cantonese when children needed translations. She also routinely focused on English vocabulary (see earlier example). Yung-Chan and collaborators (Genishi, Yung-Chan, & Stires 2000) analyzed many

> Knowing how language is used at home in children's families is an advantage for teachers who want to build on what children bring to the classroom.

examples of classroom talk to see how these children who are English language learners participated through oral language in classroom activities. With no English-only rule in this classroom, all children could participate in either Cantonese or English. In terms of what August and Hakuta (1997) call "program components that make a difference," Yung-Chan's language instruction incorporates

• out-of-school experiences and classroom activities in science, language arts, math, and so on
• a focus on vocabulary of interest to all children (not just those learning English)
• the creation of teachable moments that keep prior experiences and the words to describe them alive in children's memories

Unlike Yung-Chan, most teachers are unable to speak the primary language of the English language learners in their classrooms (Brock 2001). They must use means other than the children's primary language to establish relationships through which teacher and children can communicate and learn. Fassler (1998) studied one public school kindergarten classroom made up exclusively of children designated as ESL learners. Mrs. Barker, the monolingual teacher, provided consistent and continual modeling of English, and whenever possible she allowed the children to speak their primary language as well as English. The children were sometimes able to support each other's language growth in both their home language (most often a Chinese dialect or Russian among the nine languages represented in this classroom) and English. Mrs. Barker allowed children easy access to her spoken language.
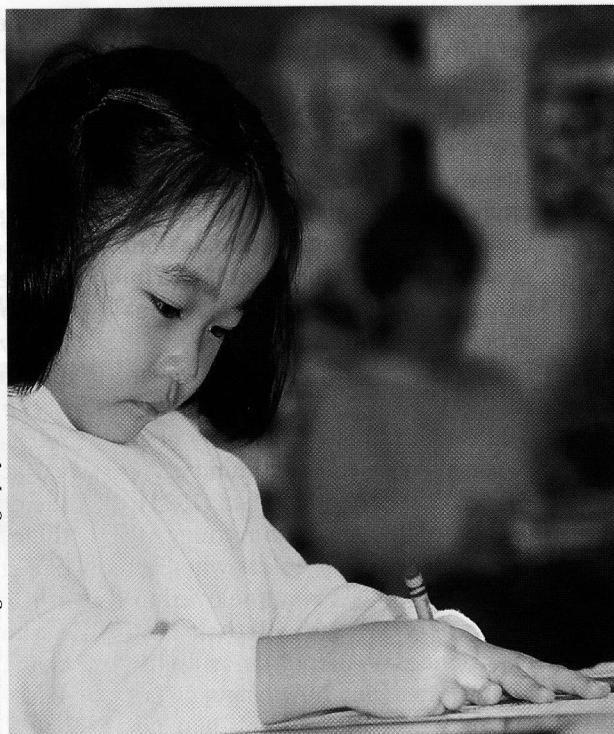
William K. Geiger Photography

In many other settings teachers try to address the needs of the one or two second language learners in the class who do not have conversational partners with whom to express intentions, emotions, or ideas (Genishi 1989). In these situations teachers who speak English only are especially dependent on their abilities to observe nonverbal behaviors, knowing that oral language communication will develop later. Translation in these settings might take the form of exaggerated gestures and nonverbal messages. These teachers might also invite additional adults or older students fluent in the children's primary language for one-on-one interactions with the children.

Implications for teachers

As young children whose home language is not English enter a classroom or center for the first time, they begin their challenging journey toward becoming speakers, readers, and writers of English. Early childhood teachers, regardless of their

preparation or background, are increasingly expected to accompany English language learners on this journey and to make it a successful one. Teachers are expected to meet learners' social and academic challenges by providing responsive environments and respect for what children bring with them.

In keeping with the findings of the limited classroom research done in settings for young children, teachers who work successfully with children who are English language learners appear to build on what children already know. They do this when they

• show flexibility with curriculum
• have high expectations for all learners but allow for individual variation
• encourage and enjoy the human connections made through the processes of learning language

These teachers do not expect children to take identical paths to learning English, nor do they expect them to pass through predictable stages of language learning (Genishi, Dubetz, & Focarino 1995). Further, these teachers do not rely on a set curriculum for teaching oral language or literacy. Instead they learn from the children and adapt their curricula to allow for group preferences and individual variation. In short, they expect and adjust to variation and not uniformity.

Successful teachers of English language learners also look at the children's language glasses in a particular way: they see them as at least half full. They allow talk in the children's primary languages, and most important, they see the children as resourceful and resist categorizing them as "limited" or "deficient." Just as they resist

programs or curricula that are rigid (either bilingual or monolingual, phonics or whole language), they resist rigid divisions between children who know English and those who do not. Their view of the classroom as "a site for everyone to learn" may seem like an educator's slogan, but it is a view that is productive and rich for these teachers and their children.

What would happen if more people shared this view of the classroom? More studies might follow individual learners and teachers over time, focusing on specific programs and classrooms. Educational policies might resist acceptance of a "one size fits all" way of learning language or literacy (Gutierrez 2001) and demonstrate a deeper understanding of how difficult it is to be young English language learner in a classroom, expected to learn in English immediately. Finally, there might be a greater appreciation of the countless ways in which children learn (Dyson 1999), in their sometimes unruly but always original ways.
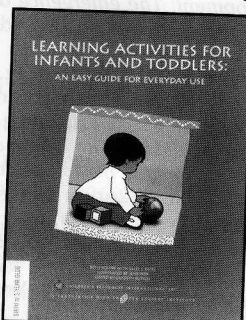
References

August, D., & K. Hakuta, eds. 1997. *Improving schooling for language-minority children: A research agenda.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Baker, K.A., & A.A. de Kanter. 1981. *Effectiveness of bilingual education: A review of the literature.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Ballenger, C. 1992. Because you like us: The language of control. *Harvard Educational Review* 62 (2): 199–208.

Ballenger, C. 1999. *Teaching other people's children: Literacy and learning in a bilingual classroom.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Ben-Zeev, S. 1977. The influence of bilingualism on cognitive strategy and cognitive development. *Child Development* 48 (3): 1009–18.

Bloom, L. 1998. Language acquisition in its developmental context. In *Handbook of child psychology: Cognition, perception, and language*, vol. 2, eds. D. Kuhn & R. Siegler, 309–70. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Brock, C. 2001. Serving English language learners: Placing learners learning on center stage. *Language Arts* 78 (5): 467–75.

Bruner, J.S. 1983. *Child's talk: Learning to use language.* New York: Norton.

Cummins, J. 1986. Empowering minority students: A framework for intervention. *Harvard Educational Review* 56 (1): 18–36.

Dannoff, M.N. 1978. Evaluation of the impact of ESEA Title VII Spanish-English bilingual education programs. Technical report. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.

Duncan, S., & E. DeAvila. 1979. Bilingualism and cognition: Some recent findings. *NABE Journal* 4: 15–50.

Dyson, A.H. 1999. Transforming transfer: Unruly children, contrary texts, and the persistence of the pedagogical order. In *Review of research in education,* vol. 24, eds. A. Iran-Nejad & P.D. Pearson, 143–73. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

Fassler, R. 1998. Room for talk: Peer support for getting into English in an ESL kindergarten. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 13 (3): 379–409.

Fillmore, L.W. 2000. Loss of family languages: Should educators be concerned? *Theory Into Practice* 39 (4): 203–10.

Fouser, R.J. 1996/97. The relevance of L3 acquisition research. *TESOL Matters* 6 (6): 9.

Genishi, C. 1988. Children's language: Learning words from experience. *Young Children* 44 (1): 16–23.

Genishi, C. 1989. Observing the second language learner: An example of teachers' learning. *Language Arts* 66 (5): 509–15.

Genishi, C., N. Dubetz, & C. Focarino. 1995. Reconceptualizing theory through practice: Insights from a first grade teacher and second language theorists. In *Advances in early education and day care*, vol. 7, ed. S. Reifel, 123–52. Greenwich, CT: JAI.

Genishi, C., D. Yung-Chan, & S. Stires. 2000. Talking their way into print: English language learners in a prekindergarten classroom. In *Beginning reading and writing*, eds. D.S. Strickland & L.M. Morrow, 66–80. New York: Teachers College Press and Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Gutierrez, K.D. 2001. What's new in the English language arts: Challenging policies and practices, *"y que?" Language Arts* 78 (6): 564–69.

Hakuta, K. 1986. *Mirror of language: The debate on bilingualism.* New York: Basic.

Hakuta, K., & R.M. Diaz. 1985. The relationship between degree of bilingualism and cognitive ability: A critical discussion and some new longitudinal data. In *Children's language,* vol. 5, ed. K.E. Nelson, 319–44. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Hakuta, K., & L. Pease-Alvarez. 1992. Enriching our views of bilingualism and bilingual education. *Educational Researcher* 21 (2): 4–6.

Lambert, W.E. 1977. The effects of bilingualism on the individual: Cognitive and socio-cultural consequences. In *Bilingualism: Psychological, social and educational implications*, ed. P. Hornby, 15–27. New York: Academic Press.

Macías, R.F. 2000. *Summary report of the survey of the states' limited English proficient students and available educational programs and services, 1997–98.* Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.

Moll, L., C. Amanti, D. Neff, & N. Gonzalez. 1992. Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice* 31 (1): 132–41.

Nelson, K. 1996. *Language in cognitive development: The emergence of the mediated mind.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Pease-Alvarez, L., & O. Vasquez. 1994. Language socialization in ethnic minority communities. In *Educating second language children: The whole child, the whole curriculum, the whole community*, ed. F. Genesee, 82–102. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Tse, L. 2001. *"Why don't they learn English?" Separating fact from fallacy in the U.S. language debate.* New York: Teachers College Press.

United States Bureau of the Census. 1995. The foreign-born population: 1994. *Current Population Reports* P20-486. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

Valdes, G. 2001. *Learning and not learning English: Latino students in American schools.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Willig, A.C. 1985. A meta-analysis of selected studies on the effectiveness of bilingual education. *Review of Educational Research* 55 (3): 269–317.

Zelasko, N., & B. Antunez. 2000. *If your child learns in two languages.* Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education. Available online www.ncbe.gwu.edu/ncbepubs/parent/

For further reading

Barrera, R.M., C. Alvarado, A. Lopez, R. Booze, C. Greer, & L. Derman-Sparks. 1995. Bilingual education. *Child Care Information Exchange* (107): 43-62.

Cary, S. 1997. *Second language learners.* York, ME: Stenhouse.

Freeman, Y.S., & D.E. Freeman. 1998. *ESL/EFL teaching: Principles for success.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Grant, R. 1995. Meeting the needs of young second language learners. In *Meeting the challenge of linguistic and cultural diversity in early childhood education.* Yearbook in Early Childhood Education, vol. 6, eds. E. Garcia & B. McLaughlin with B. Spodek & O.N. Saracho, 1–17. New York: Teachers College Press.

Heath, I.A., & C.J. Serrano, eds. 1999. *Annual editions. Teaching English as a second language.* 99/00. Guilford, CT: Dushkin/McGraw-Hill.

McLaughlin, B. 1992. Myths and misconceptions about second language learning: What every teacher needs to unlearn. Educational Practice Report 5. Washington, DC: National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, Center for Applied Linguistics. Available online www.ncbe.gwu.edu/miscpubs/ncrcdsll/epr5.htm

McLaughlin, B. 1995. Fostering second language development in young children. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics, National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning. *ERIC Digest* ED 386950. Online www.cal.org/ericcll/digest/ncrcds04.html

NAEYC. 1996. Responding to linguistic and cultural diversity—Recommendations for effective early childhood education. An NAEYC position statement. Washington, DC: Author. Brochure.

Soto, L.D., ed. 2002. *Making a difference in the lives of bilingual/bicultural children.* In *Counterpoints: Studies in the postmodern theory of education,* vol 134, eds. J.L. Kincheloe & S.R. Steinberg. New York: Peter Lang.

Stefanakis, E. 1998. *Whose judgment counts? Assessing bilingual children K–3.* Portsmouth, NJ: Heinemann.

Tabors, P.O. 1997. *One child, two languages: A guide for preschool educators of children learning English as a second language.* Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.