Young English Learners' Interlanguage as a Context for Language and Early Literacy Development

Gregory A. Cheatham and Yeonsun Ellie Ro

In a preschool classroom, Ben, a Korean boy, hardly spoke, even when his teacher, Wesley, repeatedly asked simple questions, such as, "How was your weekend, Ben?" or "What color is this?" Though Ben sometimes looked at the teacher, he rarely uttered a word. Most days, he watched the other children, only occasionally entering their play after using several gestures (for example, joining classmates at the water table after showing that he knew how to pour water from a cup). Even when his mother picked him up at the end of the day, Ben seemed to listen but never speak.

Wesley was concerned. He hoped that Ben would learn English quickly so he could participate fully in classroom activities. Based on his observations, Wesley thought Ben had few abilities in English or Korean. He wondered if Ben's communication skills were delayed.

In the spring, another child joined the class, newly arrived from South Korea. One day, as the children lined up to return to the classroom, Wesley couldn't believe his ears: Ben was hesitantly and quietly speaking in Korean to this new classmate. He *could* communicate in his home language. With more observation, Wesley noticed that Ben's nonverbal communication skills were often effective in capturing English-speaking peers' attention. Wesley wondered how he could more effectively support Ben's communication abilities.

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English language learners are increasingly present in early care environments. In 2005, for example, 14.7 percent of children (birth to 5 years old) in nonparental care in the United States came from homes where only one parent or neither parent spoke English (Iruka & Carver 2006). Approximately 29 percent of children participating in Head Start programs spoke a language other than English (Office of Head Start 2005). Because home languages often receive little classroom support as children acquire English, children may gradually lose their home language. Consequently, early educators could think that some children cannot speak either of their languages.

This article challenges the notion that English language learners who experience home language loss do not have any language proficiency. This assumption is based on misunderstandings of the transitory phase of children's second language acquisition. It can result in children missing learning opportunities or receiving inappropriate assessments and unwarranted referral for special education evaluation. We describe characteristics of children's bilingualism that play a role in early educators' assumptions about children's shifting language proficiencies and present recommendations for teaching young English language learners.

Understanding the transitory phase

When early childhood educators believe that young English language learners have limited communication abilities, this can lead to negative assumptions about specific children's cognitive abilities, resulting in lowered expectations for what these children can accomplish (Hoover et al. 2008). Such educator beliefs can also lead to the incorrect idea that bilingualism results in language deficiencies. Early educators may mistakenly suspect that a child has a disability. Providing the right support for these children by beginning at their current knowledge and language proficiency levels can be challenging (de Valenzuela & Niccolai 2004).

Three concepts about second language acquisition and bilingualism are important to supporting children's language development: (1) the stages of second language development, (2) language attrition/language loss, and (3) code switching or mixing (switching between two languages in one conversation or even in one sentence) (Hoover et al. 2008).

Stages of second language development

One reason it may appear that some English language learners have inadequate language skills is that the children are progressing through stages of sequential second language acquisition. Research suggests that as children listen to or participate in conversations, they develop ideas about how language works. When children are learning two languages, they develop *interlanguage*—a "transitory grammar" (Paradis 2007, 9) based on the rules they have observed in their home language and those they observe in their new language (Barron 2003). Remarkably, even with limited English proficiency, these children find ways to communicate.

In a nonverbal period, children listen to and study the new language, trying to understand which rules apply. As they gain more competence in English, they may rehearse English phrases, which may or may not be communicative in context (Tabors 2008). They may repeat to themselves English sounds, words, and phrases they have heard children and adults use during classroom activities. Tabors provides the following example: At the water table, an English speaker uses a sentence including the words *have to*; the child who is learning English watches, then mouths the words *have to* (Tabors 2008, 53). Similarly, as children hear more English, they tend to use telegraphic or formulaic language—imitative phrases, such as "I don't know," and one-word utterances that provide only basic content, such as saying "Yellow!" when naming colors (Tabors 2008). Rather than limited communication ability, Tabors's research indicates that these expressions are a natural feature of children's budding second language development.

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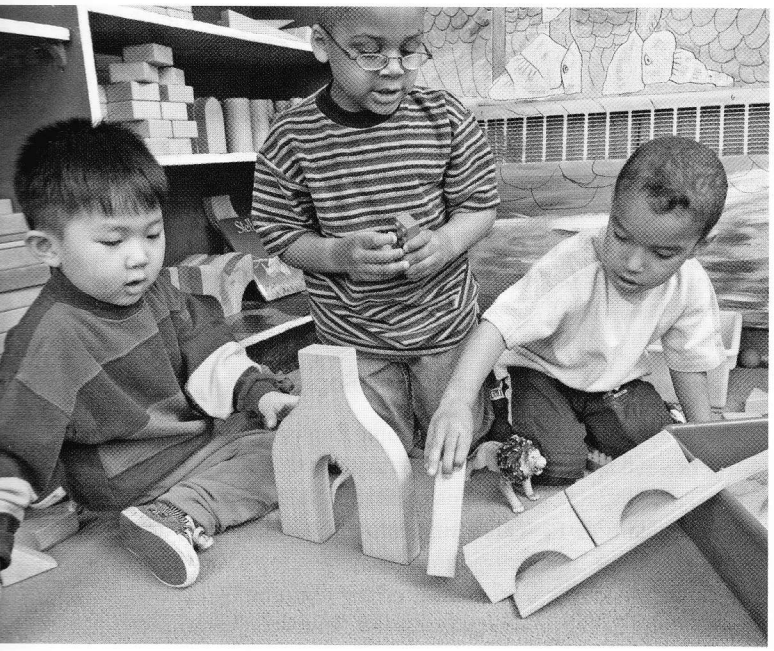


Home language attrition or loss

As new English skills are developing (as described above), children may not receive the necessary support for home language development (de Valenzuela & Niccolai 2004) at home or at school. Consequently, they may lose skills in their home language (Wong Fillmore 1991).

Despite the seeming lack of communicative abilities in the home language and English at this point in their language learning, according to Genesee, Paradis, and Crago (2004), children continue to have some level of proficiency in both the home language and English: "[Children] still have functional means of communication because their [home language] proficiency does not decline so quickly to say that they cannot speak any language; likewise, their [English] proficiency increases quickly enough for interpersonal communication" (p. 143). Unfortunately, these communication skills may be invisible to early educators, who see children remaining silent in English-speaking environments and do not see the children interact in the contexts where their home language skills are most useful (for example, home and community). At this point, with only basic English phrases and diminishing ability in their home language, children may seem incapable of communicating, but educators should remain patient. A lot of language learning is still occurring.

Code switching and mixing

When children switch between or mix their two languages, it may seem that the children do not have good skills in either language (Perez & Nordlander 2004). However, these children are naturally tapping linguistic resources, using rules and vocabulary from both languages (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago 2004).

Children use code switching intentionally for specific situations, listeners, and topics (Stavans & Swisher 2006). They may switch languages to demonstrate social identity, convey specific meanings, or emphasize a point (Gumperz 1982). Rather than being a sign of language confusion, code switching is *skilled performance* (Myers-Scotton 1993) in which speakers pull from their growing linguistic repertoires (Gumperz 1982). To illustrate, Ro (2008) documented the following interaction between a Korean mother and her bilingual son, Kevin, who used English to emphatically state that he wanted milk:

Mother (in Korean): Who wants more milk?

Kevin (in English): Me!

Mother (in Korean): Are you sure you want to have more?

Kevin (in Korean): I want to have more.

Though at times children may use words in one language simply because they cannot remember the corresponding words in another language (Bauer 2000), code switching and mixing are linguistic benefits rather than an indication of a deficit. When bilingual children play and talk with other bilingual children, mixing and switching languages is both effective and appropriate (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago 2004).

It's important to consider the meanings behind code switching and other language mixing and to avoid showing displeasure to children; especially consider that expressing disapproval of words from the home language may threaten children's bicultural and bilingual identity (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago 2004).

Recommendations for teaching English language learners

Two strategies for teaching young English language learners who are in the early stages of their interlanguage development are pretend play and narratives. These strategies follow NAEYC's recommendations in its position statement on responding to linguistic and cultural diversity (1995). Importantly, as Cheatham, Santos, and Ro (2007) assert, the loss of children's home language is not inevitable. The development and the maintenance of young children's home language support English language acquisition, culture retention, and family stability. Families and teachers can implement various strategies to help children maintain and expand their home language skills. (See "Resources on Supporting Children's Language Development," p. 22.)

The strategies of pretend play and narrative are focused on environments in which English is the sole means of communication, but using children's home language in early education environments can also be beneficial (Barnett et al. 2007; Duran, Roseth, & Hoffman 2009). We recommend

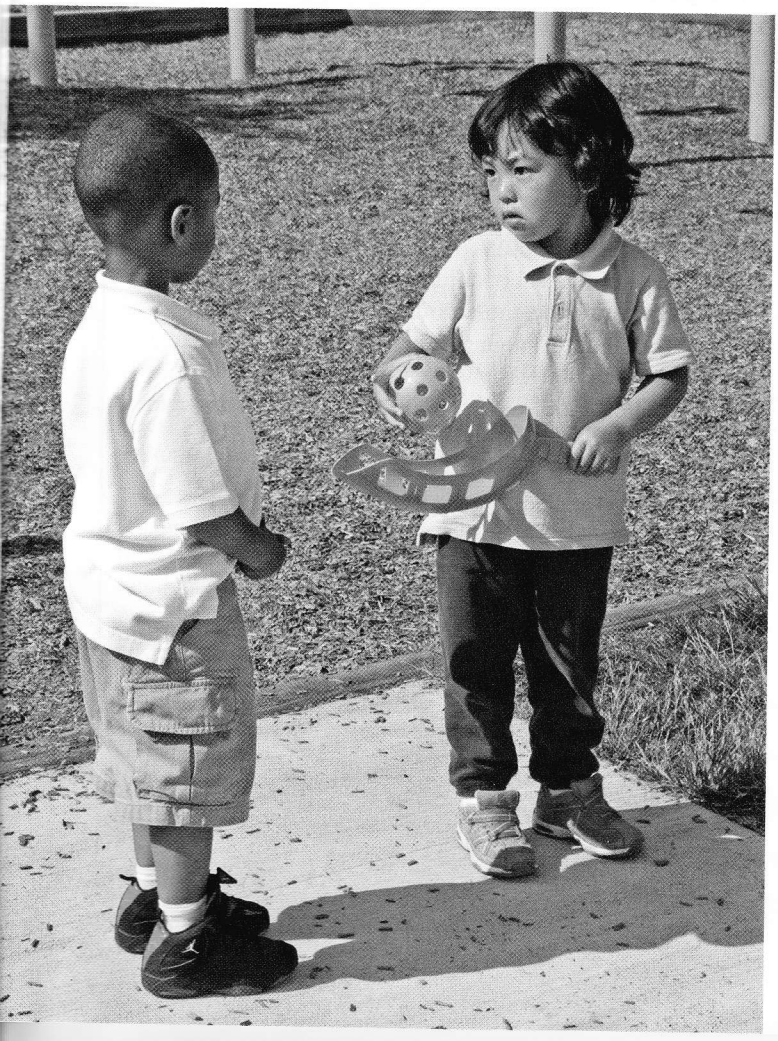
pretend play and narratives based on the perspective that English language and early literacy for children from diverse linguistic backgrounds should be embedded within naturally occurring language- and literacy-rich classroom routines. These strategies should also relate meaningfully to children's home experiences (Gay 2000), which can be tapped through home visits; individuals who know the children's language and culture well; and information gathered through conversations with children and families.

To facilitate English language skill development of older children, like kindergartners, teachers can supplement the strategies along with approaches such as sight word instruction and phonics (Peregoy & Boyle 2005). When using pretend play and narratives as teaching tools with English language learners, teachers must take an active role, providing scaffolding to increase children's language abilities.

Teachers' support can result in longer lasting, higher level pretend play with more complicated play events.

Pretend play

Because pretend play sequences are often similar to stories—they include settings, characters, plots—pretend play can support language and literacy development (Roskos & Neuman 1998; Roskos & Christie 2007). Teachers' support can result in longer lasting, higher level pretend play with more complicated play events; for example, teachers can actively model ways to incorporate reading and writing into children's play (Roskos & Neuman 1998) and use think-alouds (Perez 1998). During pretend play in a bank, a teacher could say, "I wonder what a real banker would ask for," or model writing a check. During restaurant play, a teacher could pretend to read or write a menu. Similarly, with teachers' active participation, children can play school, taking turns playing the teacher, to hear and try out English vocabulary.

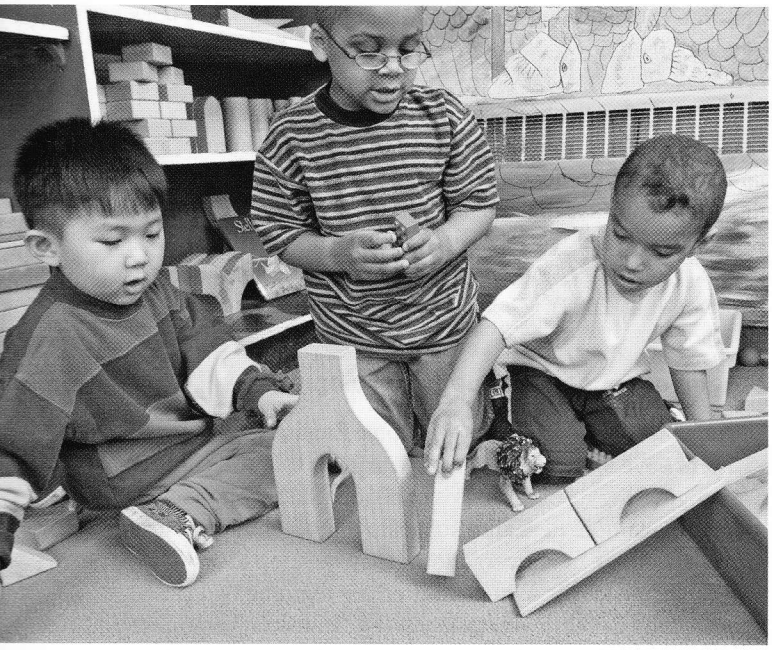


Importantly, teachers can encourage children in the early stages of learning English to observe peers' pretend play. Respond to children's nonverbal communication (facial expressions, gestures) and home language use by modeling appropriate English phrases, such as "You want me to put that here?" (Tabors 2008). When children code switch and mix with bilingual peers, give positive feedback for the effort to communicate no matter what language the children use (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago 2004).

Teachers can provide English paraphrases when a child's uses his home language with a monolingual English peer (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago 2004.). If a child says, "Can you give me the truck?" in the home language, the teacher can model this phrase in English and help the child restate the phrase to the monolingual play partner. This helps the child figure out when to use the home language and when to use English.

Narratives

Children at early stages of interlanguage development can learn English language and literacy skills from narratives even if they are not yet able to produce an English narrative. They learn to be speaker and listener (Meek 1998) as they listen to peers tell stories and, eventually, tell their own stories. During narratives at circle time, for example, all children can learn about culturally important events and items from home and community while hearing English structures that are expected at school. When children have developed enough skill in English to produce narratives, they can try out narrative sequencing (that is, using a beginning, middle, and end). When children tell and retell familiar fairy tales, rhymes (Anning & Edwards 2006), and stories from their home life (for example, a family member's wedding, a vacation, or an event from a favorite television show), they are also sharing their culture-based activities with classmates.



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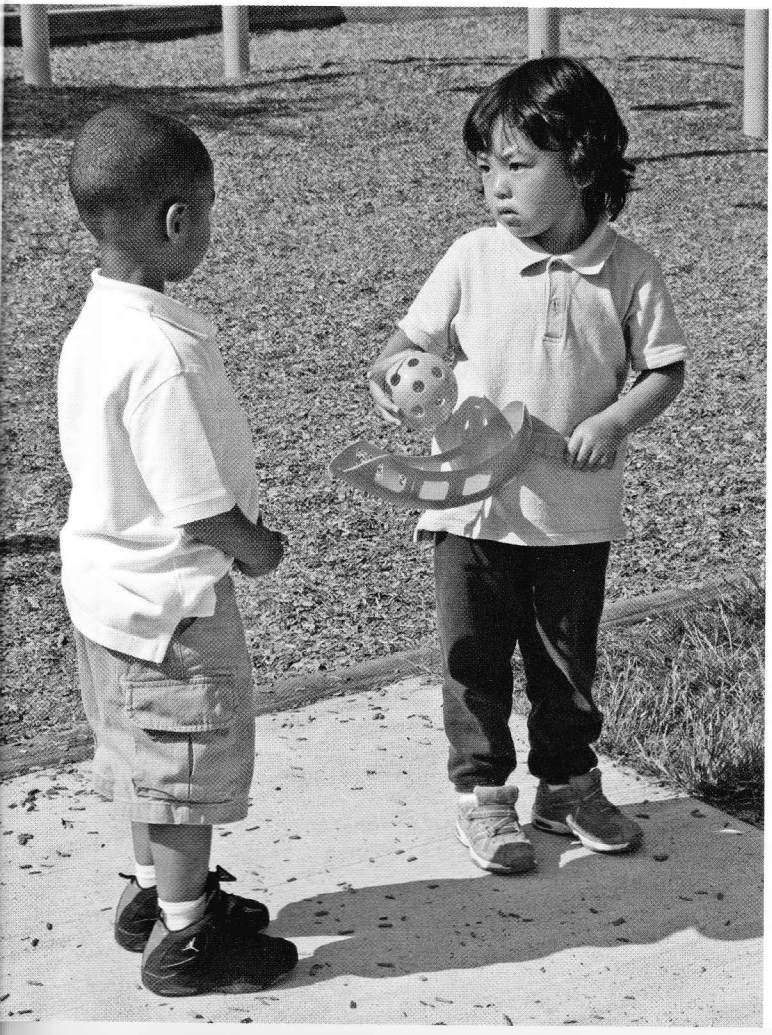

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Resources on Supporting Children's Language Development

Articles and digests

Cheatham, G.A., R.M. Santos, & Y.E. Ro. 2007. Home language acquisition and retention for young children with special needs. *Young Exceptional Children* 11: 27–39.

Coltrane, B. 2003. Working with young English language learners: Some considerations. www.cal.org/resources/digest/0301coltrane.html

De Houwer, A. 1999. Two or more languages in early childhood: Some general points and practical recommendations. www.cal.org/resources/Digest/earlychild.html

Dickinson, D.K., & P.O. Tabors. 2002. Fostering language and literacy in classrooms and homes. *Young Children* 57 (2): 10–18.

National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning. 1995. Fostering second language development in young children. www.cal.org/resources/digest/ncrcds04.html

Office of Head Start, Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center offers a number of reports on language development for dual language learners at http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/Dual%20Language%20Learners/ecd/language_development/Reports.htm

Books

Baker, C. 2000. *The care and education of young bilinguals: An introduction for professionals.* Buffalo, NY: Multilingual Matters.

Gordon, T. 2007. *Teaching young children a second language.* Westport, CT: Praeger.

Lessow-Hurley, J. 2003. *Meeting the needs of English language learners.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Nemeth, K. *Many languages, one classroom: Teaching dual and English language learners.* Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.

Tabors, P.O. 2008. *One child, two languages: A guide for preschool educators of children learning English as a second language.* Baltimore: Brookes.

The teacher's active role is critical to the success of English learning through narratives. Teachers scaffold children's learning not only for understanding of content but also for use of standard English language grammar. First, because narrative structure can vary by cultural and linguistic background, teachers should offer clear directions on what they expect from the children's narratives (for example, "I'd like your story to have a beginning, middle, and end. And this is what it should sound like . . .") (Bliss & McCabe 2008; Cheatham & Jimenez-Silva in press). Using prompts and questions to support children's use of expected narrative structures allows English learners to fully participate in activities (Perez 1998). A second approach is to pose authentic questions (that is, questions that you do not know the answers to, but would like to know). Such engaging questions include "How did this make you feel?" and "What would your family do about this at home?" (Perez 1998, 288). Then children can answer using their developing language skills.

Additionally, teachers can ensure respect for all children's culture-based narrative styles by incorporating them into classroom routines. For example, compared to traditional narratives expected in school settings, Latino children's narratives tend to focus on greater description of family relationships with less emphasis on sequencing (Jimenez-Silva & McCabe 1996). These narratives should be accepted during show-and-tell and other narrative-based activities.

When children tell and retell familiar fairy tales, rhymes, and stories from their home life, they are also sharing their culture-based activities with classmates.

Conclusion

Young children learning English often experience a decrease in their home language proficiency as their English skills gradually improve. Common misunderstandings about second language acquisition, language loss/attrition, and code mixing/switching may result in educators inaccurately assessing children's language skills, because the children's developing interlanguage may initially suggest that they have few communicative capabilities. Nonetheless, children acquiring a second language always have some level of communication skills. While promoting children's acquisition of English and maintenance of their home language, early educators can take an active role to facilitate English learning. Pretend play and narratives allow children like Ben to engage in meaningful language and early literacy experiences.

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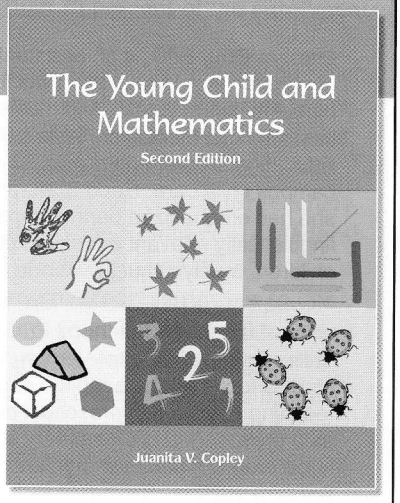

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