

# Use of Multiple Languages in the Classroom

## Summary

A child's language is their vehicle for expression, interacting with others, and comprehending the world. Many children come to school with knowledge and language skills encoded in a language other than English. These dual language learners need to develop proficiency in their home language and in English, and learn to function in and across their multiple language worlds. Regardless of the language of instruction in a classroom, and regardless of the language(s) the teacher speaks, we want children to be able to access their knowledge and build stronger and stronger language and literacy skills as needed for their dual language realities.

All SEAL classrooms should be environments that support children as dual language learners. Because young children quickly internalize messages about whether their language is valued or a stigma, it is important that teachers actively work to create a classroom culture in which language diversity is welcomed, their home languages viewed as assets, and the development of biliteracy is actively framed as a wonderful thing. They should feel comfortable using their home language. Helping all children to develop positive cross-cultural relationships and to see language diversity as positive is a major goal. Attitudinally, there is no difference in this sense between a biliteracy and an English-taught program. However, because the additional goal of biliteracy and dual language programs is to teach and develop academic proficiency in both languages, how a teacher approaches the reality of multiple languages in her classroom will differ.

## Implementation in a Multiple Language, English-Taught Classrooms

- **Invite the child's home language into the classroom**

Children should see their home language somewhere on the walls and on books in the classroom. The teacher should learn simple greetings and expressions in the languages of the students (using parents and other bilingual teachers as resources), and regularly use them. Invite students at times to work with other students who share their home language and let them know it is fine to brainstorm and share ideas in their home language. Affording them this choice is important, and also allows English Learners to explore ideas at higher levels than when they are hampered by not having sufficient English to talk about their ideas. Home-school projects can be assigned encouraging families to work with their child and produce products (simple books, posters, chants) in their home language.

- **Learn about what transfers and what does not from one language to another:**

Young children internalize the sounds, syntax, grammar and rules of language through their exposure to the language, through interaction with users of the language, and by trying out using the language to learn what "works" for communication. Children living in two language worlds (a home language that is other than English, and the English they encounter in school and from peers and

media) are developing understanding of two different language systems. Sometimes, in the process, the rules of one language are applied to vocabulary from another, or the vocabulary from one language gets combined with the vocabulary from another to piece together what a child wants to say. Once you know which languages are spoken by the students in your class, refer to one of the language-transfer resources to learn major contrasts and similarities between English and those languages. These will help you recognize, point out and support your students in learning English and to develop metalinguistic awareness about patterns and linguistic rules they can apply as they learn to bridge their language worlds.

## **Implementation in a Biliteracy or Two Way Classroom**

The goal of a biliteracy or two-way classroom is to develop high levels of academic proficiency in two languages. While there are different program models determining the balance of the two languages at each grade level, the critical dimension of language separation is the same.

### **Language Separation / *Separacion de las idiomas***

To support children in developing proficiency in each language, they need to hear authentic versions of each language. While bilingual adults and children who are learning two languages naturally code-switch across the languages as they draw upon their language resources in each language and respond to specific contexts, it is important that in the classroom, the language they are hearing from adults models each language with integrity. This means separating the two languages. In school, adults need to adhere to a separation of the languages. This is done through scheduling when each language will be used in the day or week (by subject or time period) and clearly delineating when the switch from one language to another is occurring. An additional approach is to have designated adults for each language.

#### Signaling a switch from one language to another:

Use visual cues or signals to alert the children to which language is being used can be very helpful. Strategies include: color-coding words on the walls (e.g., red for Spanish, black for English), creating one section of the wall for one language and other sections for another language, color-code tape on books that indicate which are Spanish and which are English, and using hand signals to designate the switch from one language time to another (e.g., putting on our “English hat”).

#### Scheduling and staffing:

Schedule a regular routine and rhythm to which and where a language is to be used (e.g., social studies always in Spanish, or alternate days for a language). In Dual Language programs and some classrooms with multiple adults (e.g., instructional assistants), the language integrity may be maintained by having one adult always using English and one adult always using the other language.

**Notes on Multiple Languages in the Classroom**

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