Supporting Emergent Bilinguals

Social Communication as a Foundation for Learning

by Kelly Twibell Sanchez, Helen Fann, and Sharon Pala

Lucas and Cole sat alongside one another at small-group time. Cole noticed Lucas stacking pieces of playdough during a roll-a-dough letter activity.

"What are you doing, Lucas?

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Lucas, an emergent bilingual, did not respond, and continued working on flattening his pieces of playdough and piling them one on top of the other. Cole shrugged his shoulders and returned to his work.

The number of children who are learning English upon entering child care and/or school has tripled in the last several decades and accounts for 25 percent of all children in the United States (Espinosa, 2015). While there are a number of terms to describe students who speak a language other than English at home, in this article we have chosen to use the term Emergent Bilinguals. This designation acknowledges children's linguistic skills and recognizes that children are gaining English, while maintaining or continuing to develop home language(s) (New America, 2020). Research has determined that there are benefits associated with being multilingual, including enhanced executive control and advanced language, cognitive, and social-emotional skills during preschool years (Bialystok, 2011; Espinosa, 2015; Guiberson & Ferris, 2019). However, there are challenges that come along with learning a second language.

Alongside acquiring a second language, EBs are also faced with the task of acclimating to their new social environment. Second language acquisition is a proximal process that is not just about learning the phonics and grammar of the new language; it is a task that requires mastery of the syntactic, pragmatic, and sociocultural disciplines of the new language (Song, 2018). While there is a surplus of literature related to augmenting EBs' educational outcomes, there is very limited research examining how EBs form social relationships with their peers. Additionally, little is known about the role peers play in developing language and communicative skills in EBs. What is known is that the process of second-language acquisition can impact the quality of peer relationships. EBs commonly enter a non-verbal stage while learning a second language, which may cause their peers to view them as lacking interest in pursuing social interaction (Restrepo, 2008, Halle et al., 2014).

Applied Investigations

EBs receive substantial instruction related to subject-specific learning (e.g., math, reading, writing, etc.), but limited support for social play, learning, and exchange. To address this deficiency in approach, we conducted three applied investigations over the duration of ten weeks, designed to a) prompt simple greetings and bids for play; b) teach context-specific vocabulary to sustain scripted play; and c) establish a community of care that emphasizes effective communication and enlists native speakers as active agents in the process of reciprocal exchange. Our exploration was conducted across two different preschool classrooms at the University of California, Davis Early Childhood Lab School. The children who participated in the project represent a wide variety of language backgrounds, including native English speakers, proficient bilingual communicators, and new EBs.

Both classrooms implement a strengths-based curricular approach to language and cultural diversity. As often as possible, children are paired with teaching staff who speak their home language. Teachers who are not fluent in a child's home language learn simple words and phrases to create comfort and ensure understanding. Environmental print includes labels and texts in the children's home languages. Families are invited and actively encouraged to share stories and songs in their home language in small- and large-group learning experiences. Classroom aesthetics and artifacts reflect the traditions and values of each child's home culture. Such strategies are foundational to the success of the approaches described below.

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Prompting Simple Social Exchange

Greetings and making bids for play are integral to social communication—it is how we first connect with others and express an interest in extending the dialogue or play. While many EBs have a foundation for social exchange in their home language, they may be uncertain as to how to proceed in English. Further, depending on home culture, social norms may vary and require modification in the school setting. To support EBs, teaching staff planned and implemented small-group learning experiences that included storybook reading, music and movement, and applied practice. The goal of each lesson was to introduce and practice basic greetings in a low-stakes setting with other EBs.

Each session began with the teacher singing a welcome song, pairing lyrics with simple gestures to facilitate understanding. At the end of the song, the teacher greeted each child individually and asked how they were feeling that day. Depending on knowledge of English and personal style, the child was encouraged to respond with a wave or "hello." Concrete communication tools were offered to further the conversation. For example, to communicate how they were feeling, children were invited to point at picture cards of different emotions. The teacher then elaborated on their nonverbal communication ("You pointed to the smiley face. You are happy!")

To maintain focus and limit cognitive demand, the children were initially limited to three options: happy, sad, and mad. Emotion words were later expanded to include excited, shy, tired, frustrated, and confused. After two weeks, all children were prompted to shift from a gesture to verbalizing "Hello! How are you?" with the teacher or a peer. Children were then challenged to practice basic phrases used for initiating and participating in peer play. Homemade social stories and published books were used to introduce and illustrate simple bids for play. Teachers paired instruction with highly desirable play materials from the learning environment and handwritten cue cards. The children were prompted to practice the following simple sentences:

- Can I play?
- My turn.
- Your turn.
- All done.
- More, please.

During free-play, teachers positioned themselves alongside EBs as they sought to generalize and apply phrases for social exchange in play. Support and guidance were offered in both the indoor learning environment and the outdoor classroom, where EBs may struggle to join active, fast-paced, and ever-evolving adventure play. Teachers used scaffolding strategies like "show and tell" (e.g., Teacher: I want a turn. My turn, please!) and "simplify the task" (e.g., Teacher: You can sign "play" like this,) to support EBs as they took social risks and practiced their emerging English language skills.

Teaching Vocabulary Embedded in Dramatic Play

The dramatic play area is a popular social hub in any early learning program. For EBs, dramatic play can help ignite language decoding skills, fluency, vocabulary knowledge, discourse knowledge, and metacognition (Sun, 2003). EBs can also employ their imagination and kinetic movements in order to have a better grasp of the new language (Rieg & Paquette, 2009). Without words in English, EBs rely heavily on eye gaze, affect, and body language, including gestures, to communicate an interest in joining others in an already occurring game or presenting a new script for play (Brojde et al., 2012). This reiterates the important impact teacher support can have on EBs' engagement in social play.

In addition to being present to facilitate peer communication within the context of child-initiated play, teachers taught vocabulary used in current themed play in small-group learning experiences. Vocabulary was selected based on hypothesized use of new play materials and, later, observed actions within children's dramatic play. For example, when the dramatic play area was transformed to represent a winter cabin, the children were invited to engage with pretend snow and an ice fishing pond. Teachers read short stories with simple vocabulary representative of the themed play. Concrete objects from the dramatic play were then utilized in practice scenarios. The children learned words associated with fishing (e.g., pole, fish, net) and practiced simple, attention-getting phrases such as, "Look! I caught fish!"

Establishing a Community of Care through Whole Body Listening

Cooperative learning has been shown to be beneficial in improving self-esteem and feelings of alienation in native English speakers (Ghaith, 2003). Existing literature that has documented the effects of this approach in ELLs shows that CL promotes positive attitudes about learning, boosts students' motivation and satisfaction, and increases their desire to achieve collective goals (Gunderson & Johnson, 1980; Clement, Dornyei, & Noels, 1994; Szostek, 1994; Ushioda, 1996; Nichols & Miller, 1994). The presence of social support from peers augments successful task fulfillment, increases self-confidence, and lessens anxiety in ELLs (Douglas, 1983; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Cooperative learning is contingent on the active engagement of all learners. This may prove difficult in the absence of shared language and reciprocal communication.

To address this challenge, staff introduced the children to Whole Body Listening, the practice of listening not just with our ears, but also with our eyes, ears, mouth, hands, feet, body, brain, and heart (Truesdale, 1990). This intentional approach to teaching active listening is valuable in the education of all children; it combines both social and oral literacy/conversational skills. As mentioned in a previous section, DLLs attend to and utilize non-verbal cues to make sense of words and to communicate their needs. The success of their communication is contingent on the native English speaking peer's ability to slow down and attune to the message being sent. In applying Whole Body Listening, both children are tasked with attending to and receiving messages sent.

The children at the ECL were first introduced to Whole Body Listening in a large-group meeting. The teacher read the book "Whole Body Listening: Larry at School!" (Sautter & Wilson, 2011), engaging the children in group discussion intended to prompt recall and the application of Whole Body Listening concepts. Students were encouraged to model the newly introduced social skill in the large group, and apply it as they went about the day's activities. The conversation was extended to engage children as critical thinkers related to learning a new language. Prompts such as, "Do you speak more than one language?" and "What is it like when you cannot understand someone who speaks a language different from you?" were used to solicit the children's current experiences. They were then guided to consider how they might further adapt Whole Body Listening to support their EB peers. For example, children were prompted to consider the pace of communication and the use of non-verbal cues.

The following week, children were prompted to practice their Whole Body Listening skills in a dyadic learning experience. The activity was centered on making friendship bracelets. Children would take turns asking each other questions about identity, interests, or preferences (e.g., "What is your favorite animal?"; "What is your favorite color?"; "Can you speak another language?"; "Can you count to 10 in another language?", etc.) Upon answering, a child would

receive a bead for their bracelet from their peer. Throughout the activity, the students were provided with guidance, including visual cues, of Whole Body Listening skills. As needed, children were reminded to adjust their pace and attend to non-verbal communication, in order to ensure shared understanding across languages. After the activity, the students were encouraged to wear their friendship bracelets and share the conversation they had with their peer-partner with friends and family.

Toni, an EB, was paired with a native speaking peer during the friendship bracelet activity. Toni and her peer adjusted their postures to fully face each other and practiced engaging in eye contact. Her peer partner was prompted by the teacher to ask Toni the first question. Toni had a wide smile on her face while awaiting her peer's question. Her peer waited attentively as Toni processed the question and formed her answer.

When it was time for Toni to ask the question, she spoke confidently and anticipated her peer's answer by attending to her words and gestures. At the end of the activity, both students had smiles on their faces and wore their bracelets proudly. At pick up, Toni was seen showing and explaining her new friendship bracelet to her family.

Language is the foundation for communication and developing positive relationships with peers and adults. The support provided in early childhood settings can do much to set EBs up for success in kindergarten (Guiberson & Ferris, 2019), where teacher-to-child ratios make it nearly impossible to provide such concentrated social support. The results of this applied investigation seem to agree with past research, which has pointed to a connection between language and positive social relationships. If the child is able to choose the correct English vocabulary for a context and add non-verbal forms of communication, they have a better chance of initiating successful social interactions with their peers. Through intentional program planning and instruction, the EB children who participated in this applied project demonstrated significant growth in social vocabulary, verbal exchange, and attempts in making bids for play with peers. The use of low-stakes, concentrated learning experiences allowed EBs time to process and practice language, and develop their confidence in communicating with others. Further, the entire classroom community was enriched by active listening within peer relationships.

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