

Expanding Children's Boundaries

It is mid-October and geese fly overhead as you begin a visit to an early childhood program.

In the first classroom, the two-year-olds are busy with various tasks. The room has a productive hum, sometimes punctuated by excited voices. The teachers move throughout the room, just as involved as the children.

At one table, Ian strings wooden beads on a shoelace. "Una, dos, tres, cuatro..." counts José, the teacher. When the boy peers into the bead box, José says, "Tú tienes cuatro cuentas grandes" (You have four large beads) and counts the beads on the string. Then José turns to the pattern chart that Ian is following: "¿Cuántas cuentas en el modelo?" (How many beads are in the pattern?). José counts aloud the beads in the pattern and says, "Ah, esa necesita dos cuentas más" (Ah, two more beads are needed). As they search the box for two beads to complete the pattern, José comments in Spanish on the size and color of various beads, holding them up for Ian's consideration.

In the second classroom, the three- and four-year-olds have gathered on their mats for group time. The teacher holds up a cutout of a cloud with little drops of rain, then points outside. "¿Está lloviendo?" (Is it raining?) Paulina asks. There is a chorus of no's. "¿Está nevando?" (Is it snowing?). Paulina pretends to search for another cutout, giving the children a chance to answer before seeing the visual prompt. This time the children only murmur.

Paulina challenges the children again. When they give a loud-er no, Paulina holds up the appropriate cutout: "Sí, no está nevando hoy día. ¡Muy bien!" (Right, it is not snowing today. Very good!). She then asks, "¿Está soleado con nubes?" (Is it sunny with clouds?) as she searches her materials. Rachel replies, "¡Sí!" (Yes!) and several other voices chime in in agreement. "¡Ah, sí, está soleado con nubes hoy día!" (Ah, yes, it is sunny with clouds today!) reinforces Paulina, holding up the cutout of a sun with clouds.

The next classroom is empty, but you follow the sound of voices to the large, grassy playground. Teacher Laurretta and a small cluster of three- and four-year-olds are examining a pile of turned earth. Several children hold earthworms in their outstretched hands, and others gently paw through the soil looking for more.

Laurretta keeps up a constant commentary in Spanish about what they find, where they might look, how many worms there are, and their relative size. She uses descriptors such as *fresco, grande, pequeño, liso* (cool, large, small, smooth) and asks Carolyn, "¿Dónde está su nariz?" (Where is its nose?). Carolyn points to the end of the worm. "Here it is," she says. Laurretta then asks, "¿Dónde están sus ojos?" (Where are its eyes?). Carolyn looks at the worm, and Dennis glances at Laurretta for further clues. Carolyn answers, "It doesn't have any ojos." Seeing Dennis's look of confusion, Laurretta repeats the question, pointing to her eyes. "¿Ojos?" The boy looks closely at his worm and agrees, "No ojos."

In the remaining classrooms, you observe children at snack, building with blocks, playing dress-up, creating works of art, making geometric shapes, reading books, listening and dancing to music—each activity accompanied by words in English or Spanish from the teachers.

An Approach to Second-Language Learning and Cultural Understanding

Mary DeBey and Darlene Bombard

WHERE IS THIS PROGRAM? With the Spanish, you might guess the Southwest or an urban neighborhood, but you'd be wrong. It is actually in a rural state with a largely English-speaking population.

Welcome to Bennington, Vermont—home of Bennington College and its early childhood laboratory school for children ages two to six.

Developing a second-language program

A second-language program for the Bennington College Early Childhood Center (ECC) was proposed nearly six years ago. In the long tradition of laboratory schools with a "mission to make discoveries about the education of the child by putting theory into practice" (Tanner 1997), we asked ourselves if in this age of school reform we were still on the cutting edge of quality early childhood education.

Several times throughout its 75-year history, ECC had exposed children to second languages as enrichment activities. The idea of introducing a program with a goal of encouraging children to achieve proficiency in a single second language, however, called for more serious study and conversation. Initially we drew on the literature synthesizing brain research and its implications for early childhood education (Begley 1996; Nash

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1997). A White House forum led by President and Mrs. Clinton (1997) on brain research and early learning had brought national attention to the early years as a window of opportunity, especially for the acquisition of language. The efficacy of early second-language learning convinced us that a serious second-language program was something our early childhood laboratory school should pursue.

As in the early Dewey laboratory school (Tanner 1997), the potential new program component led to an enthusiastic investigation of practice and curriculum. The air at our initial staff meetings buzzed as we sorted out which second-language program model would work best. We encouraged and valued all questions, as they helped to guide the inquiry.

Teachers and administrators talked to colleagues in other early childhood programs and the college's modern language faculty. Our review of the literature turned up little about developmentally appropriate practice in teaching a second language to toddlers and preschoolers. Since many children enter Bennington College ECC between the ages of two and three, when first-language learning is high, we found ourselves using our knowledge of first-language acquisition to guide our exploration. At this young age, there are opportunities to build on the explosion of language learning taking place. We examined our understanding of good early childhood educational practices, be they in English or a second language, and how they apply to learning in our classrooms.

Throughout our planning, the focus was on maintaining program quality. We agreed it was better to have a quality program in English than a mediocre program in two languages. ECC's commitment to quality early childhood education included setting up a rich environment in

which children could make choices from developmentally appropriate activities and materials. We developed activities and chose materials around an area of exploration that emerges from the children's play, discussions, and questions.

Deciding on a model

ECC teachers visited several early childhood and elementary school programs using different approaches to teaching a second language (see "Early Childhood Second-Language Program Options," p. 90). The programs varied in philosophy as well as practice. Total immersion programs using the second language to teach core subject matter were intriguing but not practical for our demographics. Children immersed 50 to 100 percent of the time in a second

language are likely to show proficiency and comfort in that language (Curtain & Pesola 1994). Two-way immersion programs, in which subjects are taught in either of two languages, were convincing (Curtain & Pesola 1994). Al-

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though an effective method, two-way immersion requires a nearly equal number of children already fluent in one of the two languages, so it was not feasible in Vermont with so few non-English-speaking children.



© Subjects & Predicates

We began to develop a program we called dual language, immersing children in two languages throughout the day. Each classroom has two teachers, one speaking English, the other the second language exclusively. The language in which the children hear comments, have conversations,

and receive instruction depends simply on which teacher interacts with them in an area or activity (be it art, music, movement, dramatic play, block building, manipulatives, cooking, or eating). As children engage in activities throughout the day, the second language is always present, allowing children to achieve a working knowledge of two languages. Children learn the second language in much the same way they do their first language: hearing it used in the context of daily activity with concrete, observable referents. We felt comfortable about the fit of this model with our vision of good early childhood practice.

Committing to a second language

The choice of a particular second language is a major consideration in a dual language

program in which proficiency, rather than familiarity, in the target language is the desired outcome. Several factors come into play, such as teaching staff availability, presence of the second language and culture in the community, parental preference, and access to learning materials (see "Starting an Early Childhood Second-Language Program," p. 93). The choice per se is not as important as staying focused once the language selection is made. At ECC we chose Spanish because of parental support and the greater likelihood of finding Spanish-speaking teachers.

Within the local community and the college, we recruited a few Spanish-speaking teachers. To find the rest of the teachers needed to implement the program, we initially tapped into a Bennington

Early Childhood Second-Language Program Options

Immersion programs	Total immersion	Children spend the entire day in the second language, including child choice, routines, and teacher-directed activities.
	Partial immersion	Children spend about half of the day in the second language (during a specified part of the day). The other half of the day is spent in English.
	Two-way immersion	Children are taught in two languages with 50 to 90 percent of the day spent in the second language. One- to two-thirds of the children are native speakers of the non-English language. Different days or different times of day are specified for each language.
	Dual language immersion (one teacher—one language)	Within a language-rich environment, children are surrounded by English and the second language throughout the day, including child choice, routines, and teacher-directed activities. There are two teachers: one teacher uses only the second language and the other uses only English.
Language classes as part of a teacher-directed time		A second-language teacher leads language lessons that ideally take place daily, focusing on listening, speaking, and cultural awareness.
Cultural and language enrichment classes		A program incorporates linguistic and cultural awareness, focusing on listening skills and cultural activities. There may or may not be a second-language teacher. More than one culture and language may be explored during the year.

Adapted from N. Rhodes as cited in H. Curtain and C.A. Dahlberg, *Languages and Children—Making the Match: New Languages for Young Learners, Grades K–8*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2004), 420–21. Adapted and reprinted with permission.

Each semester two Peruvian teachers arrived, bringing not only the spoken language but also their culture.

College connection with an organization running private early childhood and elementary schools as well as a teacher education institute in Peru. As our second-language program expanded, the Peruvian schools offered their teachers an opportunity to come to Vermont to strengthen their English and at the same time teach Spanish to young children. Each semester two Peruvian teachers arrived, bringing not only the spoken language but also their culture. Living in faculty housing, the teachers were invited to attend education classes and become involved in the life of the college.

However, when the United States began severely limiting cultural visas, our Peruvian connection became tenuous. By this time, a growing number of Spanish-

speaking adults in Vermont had been drawn to the program through the publicity in local newspapers and the public radio station. They wanted to share their love of the Spanish language with young children.

During the first year of dual language immersion, some children avoided interacting with the Spanish-speaking teachers, thus limiting both their language learning and cultural exposure. Stepping back a bit, we allowed for a

more gradual introduction of Spanish, enabling teachers to first form relationships with the children. Language is all about communication, and we wanted the children to connect with all the teachers. Once the children got to know their Spanish-speaking teacher, they better accepted the unfamiliar language and ultimately sought out others who spoke Spanish.

In subsequent years, with the children's familiarity and increased comfort with the second language,

the second-language teachers spoke Spanish nearly all of the time, beginning on the first day of preschool. Although new children sometimes shied away from the Spanish-speaking teachers and the Spanish language, their avoidance usually was short-lived as they watched their peers work comfortably in the environment.

Refining the program

Initially, all the teachers struggled with how a dual language program would function. While actions were clear during child choice time, balancing English and Spanish at group time was a struggle. Most teachers adopted a combination of large-group circle time with some activities in each language and small groups divided into English or Spanish speakers that alternated daily. In small groups, the teacher could give more attention to individuals, closely observe each child's level of understanding, and adjust the challenge of the second language and the amount




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of visual cues necessary for learning. The small group more closely resembled the environment in which children learn their first language, but large-group time highlighted the importance of both languages and fostered an important feeling of group identity.

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Some classrooms had both large- and small-group times daily; in others, the large-group circle alternated days with small-group circles. Again, we used good early childhood practice as the standard for making decisions.

As the program developed, teachers and administrators gave special attention to the impact of the second language on the cognitively rich curriculum. There was a concern that the children's Spanish proficiency was not at the level of their understanding of concepts. In vocabulary devel-

opment, however, we observed children assimilating new Spanish and English words with equal ease. For example, as they explored their interest in fish, they learned the words *aleta* and *agalla* as naturally as they did *fin* and *gill*.

With increased language skills, the children demonstrated a growing awareness of how languages work. Through questions, observations, and discussions, they made comparisons between the two languages and furthered their bilingual understanding. Combining what they heard during routines with what they learned during group times and absorbed throughout play exposed the children to a wealth of vocabulary and language structure that benefited their understanding of how language generally works (Baron 1992).

In the classes for the youngest age group, teachers paid particular attention to late-talking children and those with learning challenges. Our ECC classrooms have al-

ways provided a range of developmental experiences, allowing each child to be successful and challenged. Guided by good practice, we resisted withholding the second-language learning opportunity from children for whom first-language learning was already proving a challenge. Teachers gave visual cues, used simpler speech, and repeated and restated language based on their knowledge of each child's comprehension. In some cases the infusion of a second language seemed to level the playing field and encouraged previously hesitant children to try words in Spanish.

The occasional children for whom Spanish was not a second language, but a third, proved very able language learners, both in vocabulary acquisition and in language structure. Such children appeared to be more open to the fluidity of language and never developed rigid language notions.

We found that play-based, developmentally appropriate practice worked as well in Spanish as it did in English.

A play-based foundation and program success

The language program progressed, and we found that play-based, developmentally appropriate practice worked as well in Spanish as it did in English. Learning opportunities flourished in both languages. In ongoing program evaluations, teachers described the dual language component as "another layer" and "a huge, rich piece imbedded in the program."

According to most families, the Spanish-language component was not the determining factor for enrolling their children in the program but an integral part of the child's



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educational experience and a welcome addition to ECC's excellent program. Parents relayed countless stories of siblings and friends speaking Spanish together outside of school. A few families told of their three-year-olds translating Spanish into English for them on vacations in Florida and Mexico.

Throughout Bennington College, the dual language program has stimulated greater interest in the laboratory school. Some students studied the impact of the language learning on the children and the program, and a graduate student developed an assessment instrument that blends first- and second-language learning stages. Families supported such program offshoots as Spanish classes for parents and summer Spanish classes for children.

Our mantra—"Is it good early childhood education?"—keeps us focused. As one teacher put it, "Second language is not the most important thing we do, but it is good that the important things *also* happen in Spanish."

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Starting an Early Childhood Second-Language Program

- Gather a committed group of families, teachers, and administrators to develop an action plan.
- Form a study group to research program possibilities and propose an option that may work best for your setting.
- Make a renewed commitment to providing the highest quality early childhood program.
- Commit to a specific second language in which children can gain proficiency.
- Research staffing possibilities: adults who enjoy working with young children, are skilled in "feeding in language" as children play, have a desire to share language and culture, and are willing to learn about early childhood education make fine second-language teachers.
- Explain clearly to all stakeholders why you chose the program and the particular language.
- Keep everyone in the school community informed of developments.
- Allocate or identify a source of start-up funds to purchase books and materials in the targeted language.
- Keep data on your program operations, successes, and needs.
- Adjust the program to meet changing needs and goals.
- Celebrate children's and the program's successes.