



HHS Public Access

Author manuscript

Read Teach. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2015 October 20.

Published in final edited form as:

Read Teach. 2014 November 1; 68(3): 213–221. doi:10.1002/trtr.1291.

LEARNING WORDS FOR LIFE:

Promoting Vocabulary in Dual Language Learners

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Abstract

Teaching vocabulary to young dual language learners is critical for their learning in school. This article presents recommendations for promoting vocabulary during reading aloud and conversations in early childhood.

Schooling in the western world relies heavily on teachers communicating knowledge and skills to their students through oral and written language and children demonstrating what they know through words both orally and in text. This reliance on understanding and using rich language explains why vocabulary development plays such a critical role in children's success in school. Research on English monolinguals in the United States has established the relationship between vocabulary development and reading comprehension (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009). In dual language learners (DLLs) (see Figure 1), we find similar relationships. Both Spanish and English measures of vocabulary in preschool predict word reading skills in English in first and later grades (Rinaldi & Páez, 2008; Kieffer, 2012). Furthermore, for Spanish–English DLLs, Spanish vocabulary development appears to predict English phonological awareness (Anthony et al, 2009), and below-average receptive vocabulary development in the first language (L1) has been found to hinder cross-linguistic transfer of phonological awareness skills (Atwill, Blanchard, Christie, Gorin, & García, 2010).

Vocabulary development in each language seems to lag behind in DLLs when compared to monolingual children (Bialystok, Luk, Peets, & Yang, 2009), although they show a level of growth similar to monolinguals when both languages are considered (Hoff et al., 2012). Children who are raised in bilingual environments have divided opportunities to learn one or the other language and frequently learn the words in the language that is associated to the particular context. It is common for bilinguals to know words associated with academic contexts in English and those used in everyday life in the L1, since in most cases, the majority of schooling in the United States is provided only in English. Therefore, it is not

unusual to find DLLs with smaller vocabularies in each language as compared to monolinguals (Bialystok et al., 2009).

Many DLLs do not acquire sufficient vocabulary to support their success in school. In 2011, only 31% of English learners (ELs) in fourth grade performed at or above the basic level of reading achievement (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2012). As learning words takes a considerable amount of time, DLLs need support in this area early in life. As they grow older, lack of knowledge of both frequent and infrequent words hinders their ability to comprehend text in school and in turn limits their opportunities to learn new words through reading (Carlo et al., 2004). The good news is that given appropriate instruction, DLLs are able to reach higher levels of development, similar to that of monolinguals, in each of their languages, with the added advantage of knowing words in two languages (Hammer, Lawrence, & Miccio, 2008). Silverman (2007) found that a group of DLLs in kindergarten were able to learn new words as easily and even faster than a group of English monolingual children when provided vocabulary instruction that included multiple methods for learning new words (e.g., definition of target words, questions and prompts, act out words, pronounce words) through a teacher reading aloud.

Missed Opportunities

Consequently, teacher-child interactions in the classroom matter greatly for young DLLs' vocabulary development. Teachers' amount and variety of words when interacting with children have been associated with DLLs' receptive vocabulary scores (Bowers & Vasilyeva, 2011). Unfortunately, studies in early childhood classrooms that include DLLs show that the language environments of many of these classrooms are less than optimal for promoting language growth, especially when children come from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Justice, Mashburn, Hamre, & Pianta, 2008; Wright, 2012). Justice et al. (2008) found that teachers rarely used strategies that promoted language development, such as asking open-ended questions or repeating and elaborating on children's utterances and introducing new words, with any population of children. Wright (2012) found that kindergarten teachers discussed the meaning of words on average only 8.14 times per day and that these discussions were brief and intermittent. Preliminary analysis in a study that we are currently conducting suggests that in classrooms with Latino DLLs, teachers have few sustained conversations (at least four conversational turns) with the target DLLs and that teachers' talk is focused on providing directions. This is true for interactions in both English and Spanish, although language interactions in Spanish are even less frequent (Franco, Castro, & Gillanders, 2013).

Why is this so difficult for teachers? First, we believe that because language is intrinsic to our own identity, it is challenging to become conscious and therefore intentional in our language use. In the same way we would have difficulties changing the way we walk without intentional and constant effort, it would be necessary to make a thoughtful and consistent effort to change the way we talk. Unfortunately, few teachers receive professional development at the preservice or inservice level that would help them be more mindful of how language works and is acquired, in particular for children who are DLLs and come from diverse cultural backgrounds. Coursework and field experiences in "educational

linguistics” can help teachers become aware that discourse patterns used in school “are neither universal nor inherently more valid than other possible patterns” (Fillmore & Snow, 2000, p. 5). Children come to the early childhood classroom using discourse patterns learned through conversations with their family, which are not necessarily the same as those used in school. Teachers not aware of these differences might undervalue DLLs’ “ways with words” (Heath, 1983). Furthermore, considering the competing demands in early childhood classrooms, it is challenging for teachers to focus on language use.

Second, in our work with teachers, we often hear the misguided belief that developmentally appropriate practices do not involve direct or explicit instruction. Teachers frequently indicate that in order to have a child-centered environment, teachers should support children’s curiosity and interests without “directly” teaching. Teachers often believe that vocabulary instruction is more effective when it is spontaneous and follows the child’s lead (Diamond & Powell, 2011). Although we certainly agree on the principles of developmentally appropriate practices and child-centered instruction, this does not deny the importance of systematic, explicit teaching of words, especially for DLLs.

Finally, it is often difficult to maintain a conversation with children who are quiet or do not understand the adult’s efforts to engage them in conversation. Monolingual English-speaking teachers might encounter this challenge when interacting with children who are in the beginning stages of English language acquisition and/or who have learned different ways of communicating with adults. These difficulties are exacerbated when teachers have little knowledge of children’s sociocultural experiences. Understanding children’s lives outside of school makes it easier for teachers and children to engage in conversation about familiar experiences. As Anderson and Freebody (1983) have suggested, knowing the meaning of words is an indication of children’s knowledge of a topic or concept. Thus, vocabulary instruction should be paired with acquiring knowledge about the world. Including topics or themes in vocabulary instruction that are foreign to DLLs’ sociocultural experiences puts them at a disadvantage for using their knowledge of the world to learn new words and to have access to participation in the life of the classroom.

Promoting Vocabulary Development in Young DLLs in the Early Childhood Classroom

In order for teachers to become aware of how they use language in the classroom, systematically teach specific words in a variety of ways, and learn about DLLs’ level of English acquisition and sociocultural experiences, they need to consider that young DLLs can learn new words when teachers do the following.

- *Provide opportunities for DLLs to listen and use words in a variety of contexts and on multiple occasions.* Learning a word involves knowing many aspects of the word, such as its grammatical place in a sentence, its relationship with synonyms and antonyms, and its uses in different contexts, among others (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005). By presenting the use of a word in multiple ways, children acquire the depth of the meaning of the word (August et al., 2005) and can understand the different connotations of the word depending

on the context. For example, when teaching the word *wonderful*, the teacher could have a conversation with the children about a *wonderful* time they had with their family or a *wonderful* thing they saw in the playground that day. As teachers plan these opportunities for children, they become more aware of their use of language in the classroom. Some researchers have indicated that in order to learn a new word, children need to have somewhere between 7 to 12 opportunities to listen and use the word in a meaningful context (Nagy, 2005).

- *Create conditions in which words are learned in an effective and efficient manner* Since monolinguals are exposed to only one language, they often have more opportunities to listen to the same word multiple times and in different contexts. In contrast, DLLs' exposure to a word in one language will be limited to the amount of opportunities the word is used in that particular language. Teachers will need to systematically plan for explicit exposure to specific words for DLLs to use these words multiple times in a variety of settings. Explicitly teaching words also has the added advantage of helping teachers focus on specific words to teach and draw children's attention to new words (Biemeller & Boote, 2006).
- *Take into consideration that DLLs come to the classroom with different levels of English proficiency.* Second language acquisition in young children appears to follow a consistent developmental sequence (Tabors, 2008), but children's progression along the children use their L1 exclusively. This is followed by a nonverbal or observational period in which children listen and observe others who speak English and rely on gestures to communicate. Eventually, DLLs begin speaking English using one- or two-word phrases to communicate basic needs and get involved in social interactions (telegraphic speech). Gradually children start using more complex language structures, beginning with memorized phrases (formulaic speech). Finally they start constructing original sentences in English (productive period) and progressively become more fluent. Attending to this developmental process is critical for vocabulary development. Studies with monolingual English-speaking children suggest that adult language is more effective in promoting language growth when it is responsive to the child's developmental level and when it presents language forms that are slightly more advanced than the child's ability level (e.g., Vasilyeva, Huttenlocher, & Waterfall, 2006). Similarly, teachers working with DLLs will be more effective if they are able to find a balance between supporting children's attempts to use the second language and challenging them to acquire more complex and sophisticated uses of the new language (Nicholas & Lightbown, 2008). A number of strategies can support vocabulary in DLLs according to their stage of second language acquisition (Castro, Gillanders, Franco, & Zepeda, 2010; see Table 1).
- *Take advantage of knowledge of the word in the first language.* Several research studies have shown that the use of the L1 in early childhood classrooms paired with high-quality learning environments enhances children's academic outcomes (Barnett, Yarosz, Thomas, Jung, & Blanco, 2007; Burchinal, Field,

López, Howes, & Pianta, 2012). Teachers can take advantage of children's knowledge of words in the L1 to help them understand and use new words in English. For example, teachers can use a dictionary or ask the DLL's family for the translation of the core words they intend to teach so that these words can be introduced first in children's L1.

- *Make explicit connections to children's sociocultural experiences at home and in their community.* Language and cognitive processes are an integral part of the sociocultural contexts in which they occur (Rogoff, 2003). Learning vocabulary will be valuable only if children can use it appropriately in the different contexts of their lives. Therefore, children will need to become aware of the culturally appropriate ways of using words in a variety of contexts. In this sense, vocabulary instruction involves learning words not only for school but also for life. This will allow children to acquire the depth and breadth of vocabulary they need. Teachers can introduce new words in the context of familiar events. For example, in the book *The Party for Papá Luis/La fiesta para Papá Luis* by Diane Gonzalez Bertrand, teachers can select the word *surprised* in the context of a family preparation to celebrate the grandfather's birthday.
- *Create situations in which children are actively engaged in learning a new word.* As with any learning, children will learn new words if they are motivated and engaged. Teachers need to consider ways in which DLLs can participate in conversations and the life of the classroom even though they might not have yet acquired the English proficiency.

In the next section, we illustrate how these strategies can come to life during reading aloud and conversations in the classroom.

Reading Aloud

Reading aloud is a widely recommended practice for promoting vocabulary acquisition in young children. By listening to stories, children learn new words that they will likely encounter in texts once they become readers. As is evidenced in the concepts discussed earlier, a storybook reading session will be effective only when children remain active listeners and when they can participate during the reading of the story. For DLLs, this might be a challenge. To become an active listener, children need to understand at least some of the story, and to participate, they often are expected to respond to teachers' questions in English. Since DLLs might be in the beginning stages of second language acquisition, they might have a difficult time both with listening and participating. Therefore, teachers need to maximize the opportunities for children to understand the text and to plan for opportunities for children to participate, considering their level of English proficiency.

Maximizing Comprehension

- *Introduce the book in a picture walk.* When reading a new book to your class, present the book in a way that will spark the children's interest and curiosity and help them understand. Showing the pictures of the book without reading the text

might help to determine DLLs' knowledge of the meaning of the core words in the book.

- *Select a limited set of core words (three to five) per week.* Given the competing demands in an early childhood classroom, we have learned that focusing on a few words each week to teach systematically helps teachers use these words more intentionally and be more attentive to the children's understanding and use of these words. Present the core words to the children in a variety of ways. Point to illustrations, provide definitions in terms the children can understand, show objects, use gestures and facial expressions, and show the word written on a card even if the children might not yet read it conventionally (Collins, 2010; Silverman, 2007). It is important that the words you choose are connected to an overall unit or topic. DLLs seem to have an easier time learning new words within a same topic or theme than words presented in isolation. When choosing words, think about the following:
 - Is this word important for understanding the story?
 - Can the word be demonstrated in a gesture or be represented with an object or picture?
 - What words frequently appear in the text that will help children understand other stories?
 - Is there a variety of types of words (i.e., nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs)?
 - How does this word relate to the children's experiences?

Notice how, in Figure 2, the teacher introduces the core vocabulary words before reading the book. She shows the words written on cards with illustrations and objects that represent the words. She provides child-friendly definitions of the words and allows the children to give examples from their own experiences.

- *Use the children's L1 strategically.* Reading the book in the children's L1 before reading it in English can greatly support DLLs' understanding of the story when it is read in English. If you are bilingual, it is important that you do not use the two languages interchangeably during the same reading of the story. When teachers do concurrent translation of a text in L1 and English, DLLs might wait for the L1 translation and not pay attention to the words in English. Instead, read the story in the L1 first, and then read it in English on a subsequent occasion (Ulanoff & Pucci, 1999). Teachers who are not fluent in the children's L1 can ask a parent or volunteer to come to the classroom to read the story to the children. In classrooms in which there are DLLs with multiple languages, parents or community volunteers can read the book in the children's L1 in a small group. On occasion, it is important to read the book to the whole class in a language other than English even if there are monolingual English-speaking children present. This will increase the social status of DLLs in the class as their L1 would be used in classroom activities (Gillanders, 2007).

Teachers can send home a version of the book in L1 so that parents can read the story to their children and continue reinforcing the vocabulary words. Researchers have found that although reading aloud might not be a common cultural practice for some families, if the teacher suggests that it might be helpful for children and provides books in the home language, parents often incorporate this practice into their cultural repertoire (Gillanders & Jimenez, 2004). When combined with effective vocabulary instruction in the classroom, home reading of storybooks has been shown to help children learn new words (Roberts, 2008).

- *Read the story several times during the week.* Several readings of the book will enhance children's comprehension of the words. Comprehension seems to occur little by little as children listen to stories repeated over time. Children ask and answer more sophisticated questions when they are exposed to multiple readings of a story (Yaden, 1988). In the case of DLLs, repeated readings of the same book can help them "catch up" to those aspects of the story that they miss in the previous readings.
- *Incorporate culturally relevant thematic units and books.* so that children can use initially new vocabulary in the context of familiar experiences. Part of choosing which storybook to read to the class will involve determining how the topics discussed in the book have some relationship with children's sociocultural experiences. For example, the word *pour* appears in the book *The Empanadas That Abuela Made/Las empanadas que hacía la abuela* by Diane Gonzales Bertrand, which tells a story of a family making empanadas, a Latin American pastry. Teachers can relate the story to children's experiences cooking traditional dishes with their families.

Maximizing Participation

- *Be aware that DLLs participate in storybook reading in different ways depending on their phase of second language acquisition.* If the children use only their L1 to communicate, expect that they might answer questions only in this language (see Example 1). Monolingual English-speaking teachers should learn some key words in the children's L1 so that they can acknowledge the children's efforts. If the children are in the nonverbal period, teachers should expect children to participate using gestures, pointing to illustrations or showing objects. Finally, if the children are beginning to use phrases in English, teachers can provide opportunities in which children can complete a sentence or phrase and answer questions with one or two words. In Example 1, some of the children responded and made comments in Spanish that demonstrate their understanding of the words even if the teacher is using only English. The teacher expands their talk and rephrases their responses in English.
- *Encourage children to retell and/ or to dramatize the story once they have listened to it several times.* Story reenactments seem to be a useful strategy for promoting DLLs' story comprehension and vocabulary development (Mages,

2008). When retelling and reenacting a story DLLs practice new vocabulary and develop their oral narrative skills.

- *Expand the ideas in the book to other centers in the classroom.* Give children opportunities to interact with materials and activities that require them to use the core vocabulary several times a day. Teachers can prepare classroom centers that will promote conversations among children, adults, and peers in which the core vocabulary words are used. For example, teachers can ask children to draw a picture of the core vocabulary words (Silverman, Crandell, & Carlis, 2013) or introduce materials and props in the sociodramatic play area related to the core words.
- *Teach core vocabulary words in small groups.* If the read-aloud session is done with the whole group of children, DLLs may have few opportunities to participate in the discussion. Small groups allow teachers to monitor DLLs' comprehension and use of new words, and at the same time, provide more occasions for DLLs to participate in discussions about the meaning of words. According to Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002), teachers can teach new words following these steps:
 - Ask questions to expand the children's understanding of the word in the context of the story and to relate to children's experiences. For example, for the word *dentist*, ask children, "Who takes care of your teeth?"
 - Ask children to repeat the word aloud.
 - Provide an explanation or definition of the word using terms the children can understand. Use the L1 equivalent word if necessary. For example, the teacher can explain that a *dentist* is someone who keeps our teeth healthy and that in Spanish, you say *dentista*.
 - Offer examples of the word in contexts different from those presented in the story. For example, for the word *quiet* in Eric Carle's *The Very Quiet Cricket*, ask the children if there are other times in which they need to be very quiet in school and at home.
 - Provide opportunities for children to demonstrate their understanding of the word. Take advantage of words that are cognates—words that share meaning and etymological origins in both languages. For example, for the word *delicious* ask children the equivalent word in Spanish (*delicioso*) and to list delicious and non-delicious food.

Teacher-Child Conversations

Storybook reading occupies only a small part of the school day, so enhancing other learning opportunities during the classroom routine to promote vocabulary is critical for the development of DLLs. Other opportunities for DLLs to learn new vocabulary include conversations in settings such as center time mealtimes, transitions, and playing outside. In early childhood classrooms, children spend approximately one-third of the day in mealtimes and personal care routines (Early et al., 2010). During these times, teachers can make a

purposeful effort to introduce new vocabulary in conversations and to extend DLLs' attempts to use the second language. Through conversation, teachers can help the child focus on a specific theme; model new words; elicit, repeat, and elaborate responses from the child; check for comprehension; personalize or link new words to the DLLs' experiences; and negotiate turn taking (Valdés, Capitelli, & Alvarez, 2010). In addition, teachers can serve as brokers between DLLs and English-speaking children, ensuring opportunities in which DLLs can become full participants in the classroom community. As is the case with reading aloud, teachers need to scaffold DLLs' comprehension and maximize their opportunities for participation (see Table 2).

Final Words

As teachers become more aware of how they use words in the classroom, they begin systematically teaching new words with the strategies we described above. As they take into consideration children's English acquisition and sociocultural experiences when planning and implementing educational practices with DLLs, they will increase DLLs' opportunities to learn new words and, therefore, become more effective in promoting these children's vocabulary development.

Research on vocabulary acquisition in infants and toddlers indicates that adult language input not only has an influence on children's acquisition of new words but also in the efficiency of the process through which children can understand and learn new words (Hurtado, Marchman, & Fernald, 2008). Hence, it seems reasonable to believe that the amount and the depth of understanding of the words DLLs learn is more important than the type of words. For those DLLs who come to school with lower levels of vocabulary as determined by standardized measures, starting with what is familiar to them and exploring it more deeply takes on greater importance.

Teachers need to meaningfully explore children's experiences outside of school so they can use their knowledge as a point of departure for learning new words. Talking about something we know is easier than finding the words to describe events or concepts we have not experienced. As teachers bridge the gap between the outside world and the classroom, they legitimize the language discourses DLLs learn outside of school and improve communication with DLLs. In the end, our purpose as educators is not to teach new words solely so that children have success in school but also so that the children can use new words as they interact with peers and adults both in school and in life.

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Pause and Ponder

Audio or videotape yourself. Observe how you use language while you are engaged in a large- or small-group activity in your classroom:

- Count the number of minutes you and the children spend talking. Who spends more time talking, you or the children?
- How many times do you explain words to the children in your class?
- How many times do you use the new words you have taught during the day?
- Do you use the DLLs' L1? When do you use it most often?
- How many times do you engage DLLs in conversation?

TAKE ACTION!**Maximizing Comprehension**

1. Introduce the book in a picture walk.
2. Select a limited set of core words (3–5) per week.
3. Use the children’s L1 strategically.
4. Read the story several times during the week.
5. Incorporate culturally relevant thematic units and books.

Maximizing Participation

1. Consider stage of second language acquisition when planning DLLs’ participation.
2. Encourage children to retell and/or dramatize the story.
3. Expand the ideas in the book to other centers.
4. Teach core vocabulary words in small groups.

Different terms have been used to refer to children who speak a language other than English in their homes. Some of the terms used are *limited English proficient* (LEP), *second language learner* (SLL), *English language learner* (ELL) or *English learner* (EL), *dual language learner* (DLL), and *bilingual children*. In this article, we use the term *dual language learners* (DLLs) to describe young children under 6 who are acquiring two or more languages simultaneously and learning a second language while continuing to develop their first language (L1). We also use the term *English learner* (EL) to describe children 6 and older who are learning English as a second language.

Figure 1.
About the Terms We use

Teacher: Remember, yesterday we read this book in Spanish, and today we are going to read it in English. Does someone remember the title of this book?

Ingrid: *Quinito*.

Teacher: *Quinito's* Neighborhood by Ina Cumpiano. Now let me show you some words. [*Shows words written on a card with an illustration.*] This says *carpenter*.

Children: Carpenter.

Teacher: Carpenter, yeah... A carpenter makes things with wood. [*Shows a figure of a carpenter.*]

Angel: Like, he do house.

Teacher: Yes, he builds houses.

Consuelo: And *mesas* (tables).

Teacher: Yes, tables, very good.

Esteban: And dog house.

Teacher: Yes, he can build the house for a dog. The mailman [*shows figure of a mailman*] brings...

Children: Mail.

Teacher: Yes, letters.

Esteban: And Santa's, too.

Teacher: Santa? Yes, he takes letters for Santa... Where does the mailman put the letters?

Francisco: *Debajo de la puerta* (Under the door).

Teacher: Yes, the mailman can put the letters under the door or in a...

Esteban: Mailbox.

Teacher: Right! In a mailbox.

Figure 2.
Storybook Reading to Dual Language Learners

Table 1

Examples of Strategies for Promoting Vocabulary in DLLs

Developmental Stage	Expected DLL Response	Examples of Teacher's Strategies While Reading Aloud
Home Language	- Makes comments about story in the L1	- Uses gestures and artifacts to represent words - Uses L1 strategically (e.g., reads book in the L1 first and then in English) - Uses a slow speech rate
Nonverbal/Observational	- Points to book illustrations - Responds with gestures to teacher's questions	- Uses gestures and artifacts - Uses the L1 strategically - Asks children to repeat often-used phrases and words
Telegraphic-Formulaic	- Responds and comments with one or two words to teacher's questions and book reading	- Asks them to repeat core vocabulary words - Asks closed-ended questions - Recasts and expands children's responses
Productive	- Responds and comments to teacher's questions and book reading with phrases, even though they might not be grammatically correct	- Recasts and expands children's phrases - Asks open-ended questions

Table 2

Teacher-Child Conversations to Promote Vocabulary Development

After the teacher explained the word <i>vegetable</i> in English and showed the vegetables on the lunch tray:		
Teacher	What kind of vegetables do you eat at home?	<i>Elicit responses from child with an open-ended question that links new words to personal experiences</i>
Patricia	<i>Papa</i> (potato).	
Teacher	In English, it is <i>potato</i> .	<i>Repeat.</i>
Patricia	Potato.	
Teacher	Yes, potato.	
José	I like.	<i>Recast and elaborate.</i>
Teacher	Me too. I like potatoes.	
Francisco	<i>A mi no me gusta.</i>	<i>Recast, elaborate, and model new words.</i>
Teacher	Don't you like potatoes? Patricia, how do you like your potatoes? You can eat them mashed [<i>makes gestures of mashing and shows the mashed potatoes on her plate</i>] or maybe as french fries [<i>shows picture of french fries in a poster</i>].	