How can teachers support young children, all of whom are English language learners? Play is a wonderful way to help ALL children gain the confidence and skills they need to succeed in school and life!

Creative Play: Building Connections With Children Who Are Learning English

Sara J. Burton and Linda Carol Edwards

Six-year-old Ana Belen speaks Spanish. She is in the block center with an English-speaking friend named Malik. Ana Belen tries to get Malik’s attention because she needs more blocks to complete her building. She calls out to Malik in Spanish, gesturing with her hands and asking for the block she needs. She looks at him with a confused look when he does not respond to her request. Ana Belen then walks around the block center and points toward the blocks for which she was asking. She then says, to Malik, “Tarugo” (block).

Malik complains to their teacher that he cannot understand Ana Belen and cannot play with her. When the teacher approaches, she explains to Malik, “Ana Belen is asking you to get her the square block—tarugo. Look, she is making a block shape with her hands, too!”

Immediately Malik understands how Ana Belen is communicating. His confused expression changes to a smile. Ana Belen smiles too, as Malik hands her a block. Both children understand that they can communicate, verbally and nonverbally. The teacher observes as the two children continue to play together.

Learning English: Opportunities for Everyone

English language learners (ELL) are learning to listen, speak, read, and write (Silvaggio, 2005). When speakers of other languages begin to acquire English, like all children, they develop at different rates. Teachers may encounter situations such as these with English language learners who already speak Spanish:

- Some children experience a silent period of 6 or more months.
- Other children practice learning by mixing or combining the two languages or use a form of “Spanglish.”
- Some children may have the skills (appropriate accent, vocabulary, and vernacular) but they are not truly proficient.
- Other children quickly acquire English-language proficiency (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1995).

Language acquisition is a very complex developmental process and it may take some students “a minimum of 12 years” to master a new language (Collier, 1989). Even when children seem to express themselves correctly, they may not have mastered the true complexity of the language.

Educators realize that children who are English language learners come to early childhood programs and schools with their own knowledge of the language used in their homes (NAEYC, 1995). Teachers of young children are encouraged to view the inclusion of children who are learning English as an enrichment opportunity for everyone: children who are learning English as a second language, the English-speaking students, and even themselves. Wise teachers embrace classroom diversity and create an atmosphere where all children can thrive and progress.

This article primarily considers children who come from homes where Spanish is spoken, but the premises...
and suggestions hold true for any of the “nearly 3 million ESL students” in the nation’s schools (Shore, 2001). What better way to involve and encourage all children to learn than through play?

What Are the Benefits of Play for English Language Learners?

Play is the primary vehicle through which children learn about themselves and others and about the world in which they live and interact. Through play, children actively explore their world, build new skills, and use their imaginations. Best of all they do it for the simple joy of doing it.

Educators are well aware of the lasting benefits of play, but the idea of “playing with language, oral and especially written language, during dramatic play is not nearly as common as it ideally should be” (Korat, Bahar, & Snapir, 2002, p. 393).

Play is extremely beneficial in overcoming communication challenges between English speakers and speakers of other languages (Little, 2004-2005; Reeves, 2004-2005; Oliver & Klugman, 2002). For children who are learning English, self-directed play establishes an informal, non-threatening atmosphere that is one of the most valuable ways of learning.

When children are engaged in the process of play, they usually care very little about an end product. They are free to figure out what they want to do and when they want to do it. They engage in spontaneous activity. In other words, children are in control. Play is a hands-on activity in which children choose their own learning adventures. They learn while doing something they have decided to do. What are children learning through play?

• Children increase the size of their vocabularies and their ability to comprehend language.
• They develop skills in cooperation by sharing and taking turns.
• Play helps children to develop empathy and strengthens their ability to express emotions (Oliver & Klugman, 2002).
• Play enables children to develop patience and tolerance (Dorrell, 2000).
• During play, children feel comfortable enough to take risks. As they gain self-reliance and feel successful (Edwards, 2002) they begin to function more independently and eventually take more risks outside of the play environment.

Play is essential for the sound development of all children, but it is especially important in the growth and development of children who speak English as a second language. How did Ana Belen and Malik benefit from playing? They interacted in the block section, primarily with nonverbal communication, and both learned a new vocabulary word. After resolving their initial lack of knowledge about the Spanish and English words for **block**, they played together in such a way that both students felt comfortable.

Children who are learning a language benefit from play in several ways (Silver, 1999). Play helps establish bonds of friendship among children who do not communicate well in English (p. 67). During play, children who are learning English may exhibit independence and self-assurance that is not otherwise evident.

For example, Silver noted that children who were learning English tended to engage in solitary play when painting or doing cut-and-paste activities. As they got used to the routine, they became involved in play with rules and games. One child was very shy and used mostly telegraphic speech (see sidebar).

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After engaging in play, he gradually built up his confidence to volunteer to go first when playing a game. Silver concluded that only during periods of play was this child on “equal footing with the others in the class” (1999, p. 67).

**Telegraphic speech**: Use of only the words necessary to communicate. For example, “I want to be picked up,” might be verbalized as “pick up.”

### How Can Teachers Support English Language Learners?

Teachers have a critical role in organizing their classrooms, structuring activities, and planning the use of materials in order to maximize all children’s participation in play. Early childhood educators can celebrate children’s strengths and allow them many ways to express their own interests and talents.

Many children born in the United States speak English at school, but speak their native language elsewhere. Speaking Spanish at home and among friends is one way that families cherish their ties to their home country. Silvaggio (2005) notes that children need adult help to negotiate this new world. It is not an easy task for teachers, who often lack resources to work with English language learners. As Shore (2001) explains, there are simple and practical ways that educators can help ESL children succeed. These are a few possibilities.

**Assess needs.** Find out where students’ skill levels are, not only in English but in other areas of development as well. Families’ perspectives, previous child care providers’ insights, and regular observations are essential resources for understanding children.

**Empathize.** Imagine how overwhelming it is to walk into a classroom where you only understand part of what you hear. The first author of this article remembers studying in Spain during her college years and being truly scared during the first few months there. Even though she had studied the language for a number of years, she felt helpless, insecure, and disconnected. How much more difficult it must be for a young child!

**Foster a sense of belonging.** Make sure all children feel welcomed by being patient. Use body language and pictures to communicate while learning welcoming words in their languages. Take care to pronounce children’s names correctly. Be aware of children’s needs for personal space and privacy, too.

**Assign buddies.** All children yearn to feel important and included. English-speaking children can be terrific resources to those who speak other language by making sure they can find the way around school, count money at lunchtime, understand directions, and more.

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**Keep track of language progress.** Maintain a portfolio of each child. Save photographs, recordings, artwork, and writing samples. Review records with the child (and family) to see progress over time. This is an important way to acknowledge children’s strengths and accomplishments.

**Encourage family involvement.** Encourage parents of children who are learning English to feel like they are a part of the community and classroom. If needed, arrange for an interpreter at meetings and conferences. Learn more about each family’s culture so that interactions with each other are always respectful. Study the language and learn important words and phrases.

**Learn key words.** Make sure all staff and children quickly learn basic vocabulary words in both languages, such as restroom, clock, teacher, and bus. Picture cards and labels with words are an excellent tool to use with children who are beginning to learn about written language.

**Foster an appreciation of cultural diversity.** Diverse cultures are an asset for any classroom. Respect
each culture’s customs, make and taste a variety of foods, learn vocabulary words, create maps, talk with family members, and encourage all children to share their traditions.

Ask and observe to find out how children prefer to be encouraged and supported to succeed—these strategies vary by culture and custom. “Children with high motivation, self-confidence, and low levels of anxiety are more successful second language learners” (Szecsi & Giambo, 2004/2005, p. 104).

Find out how children prefer to be encouraged.

In an ideal environment, children play independently, at their own pace, in their own unique way, and have the necessary materials to facilitate their play. “We need to play in English, not just speak English at school,” said one student (Reeves, 2004/2005). Learning centers provide unique opportunities for all children to participate in free play, and this puts children who are learning English on “a level playing field” with their peers (Silver, 1999).

Dramatic Play Enhances Language Development

A dramatic play center is especially useful for children who are English language learners. Pretend play enables them to communicate in an informal setting and gather information that will be helpful to them, even beyond the classroom.

For example, during pretend play, children explore activities and relationships important to them in the real world. They typically investigate the role of family members, community helpers, and health care professionals (Texas Workforce Commission, 2002). Children bring their own knowledge into their play as they cooperate with one another.

In the dramatic play center, children build language and literacy skills. English language learners soon begin to communicate in effective and appropriate ways with both children and adults. They have many opportunities to “practice their language skills with peers” (deAtiles & Allexsaht-Snider, 2002) in a “language-rich environment” (Szecsi & Giambo, 2004/2005).

A language-rich environment is essential in any early childhood classroom. Include props such as telephone books, magazines, and restaurant menus for dramatic play. By labeling items, teachers expose all children to print in both languages. This enables children who are learning English to encounter reading and speaking while they play and gives them a “multisensory approach” (Gasparro & Falletta, 1994) to language acquisition.

For example, Luis Jose and Sophie are pretending to go to the subway station. The props are labeled with text and pictures of a train, ticket, money, a caution sign in both languages, so each child knows each object in his or her language. Even though they speak different languages, they are able to recreate what happens at the subway station.

Unscripted role play is a valuable way for children to interact informally and gain the confidence they need to speak aloud. Similarly, playing restaurant is efficient and helpful for children as they read menus, practice ordering, interact with a waiter, and use table manners. For children, it seems less important that they can engage in English or Spanish conversations. What does appear to matter to them is that they can interact and understand each other.

Teachers can choose relevant, diverse themes for dramatic play and provide props for each theme. Stock the area with tickets, pretend money, many types of groceries, tools, and toy animals. By using

A Few Book Choices for Reader’s Theater

Juego de dedos (Finger Games) by Pablo Serrano. This rhyming book contains creative photos, illustrations, and text to help children learn the names of their fingers.

La gallina hambrienta (Hungry Hen) by Richard Waring. What happens when a greedy fox watches a chicken getting bigger every day?

La hora del baño (Bath Time) by Jeanne Ashbé. An easy-reading board book that includes simple texts and foldouts showing a toddler and his teddy bear getting ready to take a bath.

Un pez dos peces pez rojo pez azul (One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish) by Dr. Seuss. This well-known humorous story incorporates rates counting, colors, and many other early concepts.

Los Meros Meros Remateros (Grandma and Me at the Flea) by Juan Felipe Herrera. A Mexican American boy bounds from booth to booth, visiting fellow flea market vendors in order to collect churros, chilies, and healing herbs. Includes side-by-side Spanish and English text.

The Desert Is My Mother (El Desierto Es Mi Madre) by Pat Mora. Mora invokes the grand powers of the desert, as she shouts thunder and flashes lightning.

¡Salta, Ranita, Salta! (Jump, Frog, Jump!) by Robert Kalan. A tale of a frog who chases a fly then is chased by a fish, a snake, a turtle, a net, and then a group of children.
mostly familiar items, children find creative ways to play. Playing with real-life materials helps children feel more comfortable.

Teachers can also create a Reader’s Theater. Children perform dramatic representations of a story read to them in class or by a friend (Szecsi & Giambo, 2004/2005). The list in the box contains a sample of books that may be helpful in working with Spanish speakers. These books can be integrated into many themes. Some books are also available in English so that children can “read” together.

Teachers who want children to feel at ease in the classroom must “reach past psychological and cultural barriers that lead students to prefer the safety of silence to the danger of speaking” (Reeves, 2004/2005). When children feel comfortable and relaxed, they will speak up and show what they have learned. “Drama places learners in situations that seem real,” (Gasparro & Falletta, 1994) so when students use the goal language (English) for a specific purpose, the language is more easily internalized and remembered.

Through a variety of play experiences, children who are learning English become more prepared to engage in everyday interactions with English speakers. They eventually gain the confidence to participate in the community.

What Role Do Families Play?

Parents and extended family members play a large role in helping children learn a new language and successfully adapt to the culture in which they live. Many families who speak another language and value their own culture face a difficult challenge when it comes to maintaining that culture and wanting their children to learn English as quickly as possible (Giambo & Szecsi, 2005). Share these suggestions with families, who can help their children thrive in two cultures and languages.

Many school-related skills that parents teach their children in their native language transfer to their new language and classroom. Translators and resources in other languages are increasingly available in many communities. Families and teachers are urged to work together to facilitate each child’s growth in language and in life.

Outlook for the Future

“Young children are just beginning to learn about the world, and because they are still amateurs, they make mistakes, they get confused, and they do not always get things just right. They need a positive reaction from the adults around them, and they need to be recognized for their own individual value” (Edwards, 2005, p. 2).

This challenge is true for teachers and their interactions with all children, including those who are learning another language. Young children construct knowledge by building on familiar experiences. Educators provide young children with an extensive array of meaningful experiences.

When children learn new vocabulary words and practice pronunciation and language conventions, they are gaining skills for life. Taking the time to help children learn English as well as key words in other languages enables them to succeed in their learning environment. They will gain the confidence and abilities to succeed in the diverse culture in which they live.

Hispanics are the largest minority population in the United States, with 39.9 million people as of July 2003 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Hispanic youth also have a high

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### How Families Help Children Adjust to a New Language and Culture

- Read aloud in both languages to your children. Many reading skills transfer between languages.
- Get involved in community activities with your children. Go on local history tours, visit nature centers, and attend library story times. Link up with groups with similar interests, such as recreation departments, faith communities, and heritage festivals.
- Play board games. This will enrich skills such as counting, using money, and learning new words.
- Watch a few English-language children’s educational television programs together such as *Reading Rainbow* or *Zoom!* The language is easy to understand and the characters are real. Talk about children's ideas afterwards, too.
- Become active in sports. Choose sports suitable for children’s ages. These welcoming social interactions enable children to learn new expressions and casual rules of the language. Families are likely to gain new friendships. (adapted from Giambo & Szecsi, 2005)

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### Celebrate children’s strengths.

Keeping children’s fluency and literacy (if already acquired) in the native language while developing new language skills is a tremendous benefit because people “who are bilingual have an advantage in our increasingly global economy” (Giambo & Szecsi, 2005).
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dropout rate: “Nearly one in three students fails to graduate from high school” (Clearinghouse on Urban Education, 2000). Solutions are urgently needed to help children who speak Spanish become fluent in the language and gain skills they need to become productive, healthy adults.

Almost every teacher works with one or more English language learners every year. The education challenge is to make every situation a truly beneficial “teachable moment.” Partnerships with children (and their families) will benefit children's language and literacy skills and build the confidence they need to succeed. After all, “People who can communicate in at least two languages are a great asset to the communities in which they live and work” (Cutshall, 2004/2005, p. 23).

Summary

As leaders and mentors, teachers can best help culturally and linguistically diverse children and families by respecting the importance of each child’s home language and culture. Educators who embrace, respect, and preserve the many ethnic and linguistic backgrounds of students will enable them to increasingly contribute to this diverse culture.

References

Clearinghouse on Urban Education. (2000). School practices to promote the achievement of Hispanic students. ERIC Digest Number 153.


**Put These Ideas Into Practice!**

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### What children learn through play
- Children’s vocabularies increase.
- Sharing and taking turns improves cooperation.
- Children develop empathy and express emotions.
- They develop patience and tolerance.
- Children gain self-reliance and feel successful.
- They become more independent.

### Enrichment experiences for young children

**Focus on the dramatic play area.** Add familiar props such as clothing, flowers, restaurant menus, pretend money, foods and tools, toy animals, magazines, and real-life materials. Label items in both languages for older preschoolers and primary children. Encourage informal, language-rich play.

**Create a Reader’s Theater.** Offer age-appropriate and culturally relevant books, puppets, and dress-up clothing. Encourage role play of the stories in both English and children’s own languages.

**Offer everyday opportunities to use English.** Pair an English language learner with an English-speaking student. Ask older English-speakers to read to younger ELL students. Encourage ELL students to read to younger peers.

**Enrich learning opportunities.** Ask older ELL students to interview a teacher, another student, or a member of the community. Students create their own interview questions, take photos, record the answers, and share the experience with classmates.

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### Ways teachers support English language learners

- Find out their skill levels in all areas. Ask parents and previous child care providers to share their insights.
- Imagine what it is like to be in a group where you only understand part of what you hear.
- Be patient.
- Make sure children and families feel welcome. Learn a few words of their languages.
- Ask classmates to help each other during classroom routines.
- Regularly observe children and record progress.
- Keep a portfolio of photos, recordings, art, and (for older children) writing samples.
- Help families feel part of the community and classroom.
- Appreciate diversity.

### Adult learning experiences that build on these ideas

- Start learning children’s languages. Perhaps a child’s family member would like to tutor YOU.
- Get to know children’s cultures. Shop in ethnic stores their families frequent. Attend community events. Read about diverse families to gain a better understanding of their strengths and challenges.
- Engage staff in a cultural immersion experience. Find a meeting moderator who speaks the chosen language, such as Spanish. Show a clip from a Spanish-language film. Each teacher receives a handout, in Spanish, about the film. After viewing the film, small groups discuss feelings, thoughts, reactions, and realizations as a result of this cultural experience.
- Ask an ELL parent attend a staff meeting, with a translator, to talk about issues within the school and broader community.
- Identify translators who can attend parent meetings, translate written materials, and otherwise facilitate communication with families.

### Suggestions to share with children’s families

- Read aloud in both languages to your children.
- Get involved in community activities with your children. Go on local history tours, visit nature centers, and attend library story times.
- Play board games. This will enrich skills such as counting, using money, and learning new words.
- Watch a few English-language children’s educational television programs together. Talk about children’s ideas afterwards.
- Become active in sports. Choose sports suitable for children’s ages.

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*Note: Dimensions of Early Childhood readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.*