# Learning From Each Other
## Bilingual Pairs in Dual-Language Classrooms

*Discover three practical ways early childhood teachers can facilitate children's development of linguistic, cultural, and academic skills with a teaching strategy called bilingual pairs.*

Iliana Alanís

Early education programs in the United States are experiencing an increase in the number of English learners and, consequently, an increase in dual-language programs that best serve the needs of these children (Collier & Thomas, 2009). Dual-language programs enable children to communicate orally and in written forms in both their native languages and in English (Gómez, 2000).

These models, most often implemented in Spanish and English, provide extensive time for children to develop concepts in their first and second languages. The programs typically include students who are learning to speak at least one new language and learning academic content in a second language. Thus, it is important for teachers to use strategies that facilitate linguistic and academic development.

Students in dual-language classrooms learn academic concepts by working together through cognitively challenging and interactive lessons or projects (Collier & Thomas, 2009). The goal in dual-language programs is for all children to become academically proficient in both languages.

Children's daily classroom experiences influence their development of bilingualism and biliteracy—and impact the way they feel about themselves as successful learners. Finding the best ways to promote the acquisition of linguistic and cognitive skills for bilingual learners however, continues to challenge early childhood bilingual and ESL teachers who may be unsure about the strategies for biliteracy development and second language learning through meaningful academic content. It is crucial for early childhood teachers to understand how to best meet the needs of bilingual learners in dual-language programs if they are to provide a strong academic foundation in two languages (Gutiérrez, Zepeda, & Castro, 2010).

This article describes one effective approach that can be implemented by teachers with a range of language skills. Teachers who speak one language, or teachers of children who speak a language unfamiliar to them, are urged to find multilingual family members or teacher assistants who can assist with implementing the communication strategies outlined here. All teachers are encouraged to learn at least a few key words and phrases in children's home languages to facilitate children's daily learning experiences.

## Strategies That Facilitate Academic Growth for Bilingual Learners

Effective early childhood teachers implement a variety of instructional strategies to promote young bilingual learners' linguistic and cognitive development (Fields, Groth & Spangler, 2007; Espinosa, 2009). Learning academic content in two languages can be a challenge for children who come from monolingual speaking homes. Skilled teachers create opportunities for all children to practice their new languages as well as use their first language. The most effective strategies facilitate the acquisition of concepts in meaningful contexts.

Skilled teachers of young children integrate culturally relevant teaching approaches. They support children's interactions with each other and help children connect what they know about the world around them to the world of school (Alanís, 2007). Students in classrooms where teachers ask them to work cooperatively in a socioculturally supportive environment do better academically than students in classes taught more traditionally (Collier & Thomas, 2009).

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Socio-constructivism theory—based on Vygotsky's (1978) premise that children's mental, linguistic, and social development is supported through social interactions with others who are more competent—views learning from this cultural perspective as socially mediated as well as socially motivated. Although Vygotsky's theory focused on teacher-child interactions, child-child interactions are just as important for children to exchange ideas and learn from others' points of view (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Karns, 2001). Teaching strategies based on socio-constructivism theory can facilitate the learning process for children and teachers.

## Bilingual Pairs Encourage Interaction

In order for children to develop their native language and to acquire a second language, they need to hear language in rich, meaningful con-texts that help them connect what they are learning with their experiences. They also need opportunities to practice their language production in both languages. Cooperative learning with bilingual pairs is one way to increase children's social and linguistic interaction. Placing children in bilingual pairs allows them to use their language skills as they develop academic concepts (Coleman & Goldenburg, 2009).

When using the bilingual pairs strategy, teachers partner students with mixed linguistic and academic levels. For example, a teacher might select one child who is strong in English with a partner child who is strong in Spanish. Teachers are encouraged to take into account children's academic levels as well, so that partners can facilitate each other's learning. Bilingual pairings should be flexible as students gain linguistic or academic proficiency. Throughout the year, teachers rearrange pairs as needed to maintain the matching characteristics.

Pairs of students typically complete a single project or hands-on activity as they work together. Children serve as language models and supports for one another. Bilingual pairing also reinforces the native speaker's knowledge of the language.

### Some Advantages of Bilingual Pairs

- Scaffolded concepts are learned in a culturally relevant context
- Children work together on a single project
- Children reinforce each other's knowledge of their languages
- The strategy creates a community of learners
- Children express and exchange ideas as they build communication skills
- Children develop close relationships with each other
- Children are actively involved in their learning
- Children are more willing to take risks
- Children have more opportunities to feel successful

Another important outcome of the bilingual pairs strategy is that it is a natural way to create a community of learners in which children feel safe and connected to those around them. Consistent with culturally relevant pedagogy, the use of partners facilitates the building of a learning community that supports children's expression and exchange of ideas as they build communication skills (Alanís, 2007). When children work together, they develop close relationships with each other and learn to help each other socially and cognitively (Gonzalez, 2005; Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2009).

Children are more willing to take risks as learners when they feel safe in their academic environment (Church, 2004). Children with "low

levels of anxiety are more successful second language learners" (Szecsi & Giambo, 2004/2005, p. 104). Bilingual pairs provide an opportunity for children to engage in meaningful conversations in a comfortable environment. Children who are allowed to confirm their understandings with a partner have greater opportunities to feel successful and validated in their learning process (Coleman & Goldenburg, 2009).

Children's learning is scaffolded through comprehensible input, increased verbal interaction, and active involvement of the learner (Alanís, 2000). As a result, the use of bilingual pairs becomes a learning tool for teachers and students, much like manipulatives or visuals, as children practice their language skills and solidify their conceptual development.

## *Pairs typically complete a single project.*



Subjects & Predicates

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### Children in Bilingual Pairs Participate More Fully

Pairs are the ideal group size for cooperative language learning because they ensure opportunities for more participation, in contrast with the level of participation that typically occurs in whole-group instruction when children spend a lot of time waiting for a turn.

For example, many early childhood classrooms include a circle time to focus on children's language and literacy development. Teachers who use circle time effectively encourage children to engage in meaningful language through playful interactions.

On the other hand, many teachers monopolize circle time by making their own presentations. Some use IRE patterns of questioning:

1. **I**nitiate a question,
2. allow children to **R**espond by raising their hands, and then
3. **E**valuate that response.

These two large-group teaching approaches greatly reduce children's conversations and responses to the topic, so most children are passively listening (Machado, 2010). Furthermore, with the IRE pattern, teachers and the group generally hear responses from only two or three children. Children who know the answer are the ones who quickly raise their hand. But what about the children who did not respond? Were

they given an opportunity or time to respond? What can teachers do to make sure that everyone can contribute to the discussion?

In pairs, children can participate with about equal amounts of time when the activities are designed to facilitate active discussion. The three pairing strategies described here enable children to express themselves in meaningful and comfortable contexts. They can be used with monolingual or bilingual learners. Each strategy grants children the opportunity to bring in their own perspectives and ideas to the discussion as they engage in academic conversations. Each strategy is also based on the notion that English learners bring a rich collection of language skills and ways of communicating to the early childhood classroom.

## Table 1. Turn and Talk With Kindergarteners

Mrs. Rodriguez gathered the children on the carpet in front of her and said, "Hoy vamos a hablar de nuestras familias." (Today we will be talking about our families). She asked children to Turn and Talk as she gave them this prompt in Spanish, "Dile a tu vecino algo acerca de tu familia. Por ejemplo, ¿Quién son los miembros de tu familia?" (Turn to your neighbor and tell them about your family. Who is in your family?)

Children physically turned their bodies to face the child sitting next to them and began to talk about their families. Most children smiled as they spoke to each other. All of them seemed to be very excited about talking. Children chose whether to speak in English or Spanish. Mrs. Rodriguez listened to ensure that all children had an opportunity to share. She limited her input so that children were free to discuss on their own.

After children had time to talk with their partners, Mrs. Rodriguez asked a few of them to share with the class. Diego had been speaking to Estella. "Diego, dime algo acerca de la familia de Estella." (Diego, tell me about Estella's family). By asking Diego to tell the group about Estella's family, she could observe Diego's listening comprehension as well as his language development. Estella then told the class about Diego's family.

Mrs. Rodriguez asked several more children to tell about their partners' families.

## Table 2. Second Graders Think-Pair-Share

Students in a second-grade dual-language Spanish/English classroom were learning about states of matter as part of the science curriculum. The teacher, Mr. Flores, had already partnered students based on linguistic and academic ability. Students were seated with their partners in pods of four with partners facing each other.

Mr. Flores began his science lesson by stating, "I'd like you to think about our science discussion yesterday. What were the different types of matter that we talked about? Don't say anything. Just think about it."

After a minute or so, he asked children to Pair with their partner and Share what they were thinking about. A few children had bewildered looks on their faces but the majority began talking with each other about liquids and solids. Some children chose to speak in Spanish even though the lesson was in English. Mr. Flores provided some prompting for partners who were struggling with the concept.

After a few minutes, the teacher asked partners to write down examples of liquids and solids to share with the class. Children quickly began negotiating examples to share. Mr. Flores then called on partners to stand and share their responses in English. Students who were unsure of the science vocabulary in English relied on their English-speaking partners to help them with pronunciation.

This experience enabled all students to practice their science vocabularies as they explained the different states of matter to each other. Classmates could assess each other's responses and compare them with their own. Children were usually quick to point out any incorrect answers.

Mr. Flores used their responses to further question the children in order to develop the discussion and increase learning opportunities. Students then participated in a demonstration of how solids become liquids.

## Discussion: Turn and Talk

The bilingual kindergarten learning experience described in Table 1 took place at the beginning of the school year. The activities were conducted in Spanish in a dual-language program with about equal numbers of native Spanish and native English speakers. The kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Rodriguez, was still getting to know her students and wanted to build on children's knowledge, so she focused on their families.

With the Turn and Talk strategy, all children practice their language skills in the language of their choice. In this example, they talked about their families—a meaningful and relevant conversation for children. Mrs. Rodriguez learned more about children's families and experiences, crucial information for future curriculum planning (Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2009; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992).

As children talked with their partners, Mrs. Rodriguez informally observed how children answered the question and their styles of interacting. These observations will be used to guide lesson planning and the choice of teaching strategies to encourage all children to speak.

When using the Turn and Talk strategy, it is essential to pose open-ended questions that promote discussion and reflection. Carefully plan the questions ahead of time. It is also important to allow children to speak to each other without interruption. Base the amount of time for discussion on children's ages and skills. Kindergarten children generally need only 3 to 5 minutes to engage in these conversations. After children finish speaking with each other, the teacher then asks several partners to report to the group to stimulate whole-group discussion.

## Process: Think-Pair-Share

Large-group activities are also an excellent time to use the strategy called Think-Pair-Share, which was developed by Lyman (1981). With this strategy, teachers ask children to Think about a question or idea before they begin to Share thoughts with a partner. One example of this strategy is described in Table 2.

The Think-Pair-Share strategy enabled children to review their earlier understandings and clarify their ideas with a peer before moving on to new material. Think-Pair-Share supports collaboration and learning continuity, as questions can focus on experiences and ideas about the current learning activity (Darragh, 2010). The strategy also allowed children to organize their thoughts by providing sufficient wait time for them to process their answers, often in their second language.

In the next example, found in Table 3, a first-grade dual-language teacher focused on the concept of using whole numbers to describe fractional parts.

This Think-Pair-Share strategy usually eliminates children's uncertainty and fear that they may answer incorrectly in front of their peers. Otherwise, they might remain silent.

Although Think-Pair-Share can be used with all learners, it is especially effective with bilingual learners. In the early stages of second language acquisition, students typically translate the question to their native language, think of the answer, and then translate the answer back to the language expected. This process takes time. Bilingual children need wait time to process their thoughts. In this example, Think-Pair-Share

## Table 3. First Graders Formulate Fractions

In the middle of a small-group Spanish math lesson, Ms. Medina asked children to describe part of a set in which three out of the eight crayons were red.

She used the Think-Pair-Share strategy to ask pairs of children to reflect on the quantitative reasoning before sharing their answers with the group. Students had a choice of language although the lesson was conducted in Spanish.

Ms. Medina gave children time to formulate their answers and provide a clear response. She accepted answers in English or Spanish.

## Table 4. Kindergarteners Explore the Life Cycle of Frogs

Children were preparing a graphic of the frog life cycle with their partners. Before they began drawing, Mrs. Torres asked them to first discuss the life cycle in groups of two partners, in English.

*Parker:* Frogs start out as tadpoles with a tail.

*Carolina:* I know. I've seen them at the zoo.

*Luis interjected:* Sí, yo también los vi. Estaban en el agua. Entonces crecen… (Yes, I also saw them. They were in the water. Then they grow…)

*Carolina:* Yeah, they grow and become frogs.

*Raquel:* They lose their tail and get legs!

Children then began to work with their partners to make their drawings. Mrs. Torres walked around to each pair, observing their drawings.

After the children finished drawing, Mrs. Torres asked them to summarize their learning by telling their partners what they learned. She encouraged their reflections with the prompt "Today I learned…."

Mrs. Torres again walked around and listened to what children said to informally assess their understanding. She then asked a few students to share their understandings with the class as a closure to the activity.

## Table 5. Recommendations for Pairing Children

- Establish a classroom climate of respect and support.
- Choose pairs based on similar linguistic, academic, and social abilities.
- Change partners frequently to keep learning fresh and foster friendships.
- Prompt children's discussions with open-ended questions (Why…? How…?), and phrases or stems (We discovered that…).
- Create a system to keep track of pairing and re-pairing of students.
- Role play and practice partnering activities so children gain a better understanding of partner talk skills (I think…, What did you find?, How could we…?).

provided opportunities for children to succeed as they discussed a new mathematical concept.

> ## *Open-ended questions promote discussion and reflection.*

Just as with the Turn and Talk strategy, when using Think-Pair-Share it is important that teachers ask questions that encourage thinking rather than questions with one right answer. The idea is to develop language skills through discussion. One-word responses will not provide that opportunity. On the other hand, questions that are too general or too difficult for children to answer are also ineffective. Plan questions ahead of time to increase the learning potential of the conversation and promote reflection and critical thinking (Goldenberg, 2008).

## Reflect: Clarify/Verify

Active learning takes place when children discuss academic concepts with their partners. During whole-group instruction, teachers often model new skills and concepts for students. As teachers do this, they ask many questions to check children's understanding. Like the Turn and Talk and Think-Pair-Share strategies, Clarify/Verify enables children to express their ideas related to the concept or topic at the end of a lesson in a comfortable environment. Each student contributes to the partner's understanding with questions, strategies, and explanations (Turner & Krechevsky, 2003).

The exchange described in Table 4 took place in a dual-language Spanish/English kindergarten classroom and illustrates the children's thinking processes.

In this example, Mrs. Torres encouraged children to reflect on their knowledge by explaining their understanding of the concept to their peers. Student-student discussions prompt children to clarify concepts, use academic vocabulary, and foster critical thinking.

Providing opportunities for students to process and verbalize what they are learning is an effective way to support active engagement in learning. This strategy also enables teachers to determine to what extent students are internalizing the information and to provide immediate feedback when it is most needed.

All three strategies,

- Turn and Talk,
- Think-Pair-Share, and
- Clarify/Verify

create classroom situations where all children can use their linguistic repertoires to extend their knowledge in a collaborative setting. These strategies provide children with the freedom to explore new ideas and practice their academic language production in safe and academically challenging environments (Paté, 2009). Such environments support young children by allowing them to express their ideas, feelings, and opinions.

## Recommendations for Success

Teachers who are planning to implement the bilingual pairs approach in a specific learning experience may wonder: "Where in this lesson will children be asked to talk with each other?" The answer is before, during, and at the end of each session!

Successful collaborative interactions in early childhood classrooms



*English learners bring a rich collection of language skills and ways of communicating to the early childhood classroom.*

Subjects & Predicates

require careful planning. Focus on what children are expected to learn and how to effectively pair them so they will gain the most from their interactions. Consider the recommendations in Table 5 when pairing children with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

In order for children to develop their native and second language skills, they need to experience comprehensible input and output (Krashen, 1981). Young learners must understand what is said. They learn best when they hear language in rich and meaningful contexts that help them connect what they are learning with their experiences.

> *Children practice language in a safe, academically challenging environment.*

Collaborative settings offer children opportunities to create new meaning from previously gained knowledge (Webb, Nemer, & Zuniga, 2002). They can organize their thoughts in a friendly environment. Such settings provide all learners many opportunities to acquire new formal and informal language, develop social skills, and improve communication abilities.

Early childhood teachers support children's efforts to interact with each other and connect what they know about the world around them to new ideas (Alanís, 2007). Collaborative pairing strategies, which are built on socio-constructivism theory, facilitate this process. The use of strategies such as bilingual pairs

acknowledges that young children are capable of communicating in meaningful ways and that all children benefit from interacting with each other as part of their learning experiences.

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## About the Author

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## Bilingual Pairs in Dual-Language Classrooms

*What are bilingual pairs? With this strategy, teachers partner students who have similar linguistic and academic levels. For example, a teacher might select one child who is strong in English with a partner child who is strong in Spanish. Rearrange pairs as needed to maintain the matching characteristics.*

**Iliana Alanís**

## Recommendations to implement and supervise bilingual pairs

- Model the process with a child
- Ask children to role-play being partners
- Provide specific directions
- Ask students to complete a single project together
- Provide useful questions, phrases, or stems for children to use with their partners
    o What do you think?
    o How did you solve the problem?
    o It's your turn.
    o In my opinion, …
- Monitor children's talk to assess the appropriateness of the match
- Frequently reassign partners to foster new friendships

## Skills children learn and practice with bilingual partners

- Problem–solving strategies
- Academic vocabulary
- Social vocabulary and skills
- Sharing and turn taking
- Summary and reflection

## Suggestions for partnering

- Adjust partner assignments based on similarities in language growth and concept acquisition
- Design moveable charts to track partners with Velcro®, magnets, clothes pins, or pockets
- Seat partners next to each other, face-to-face or knee-to-knee

## Partnering activities for pairs of young children

- Focus activity to introduce a learning experience
- Brainstorm ideas
- KWL or concept-mapping chart
- Review concepts
- Check comprehension
- Summarize children's understandings

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

Put These Ideas Into Practice!