



## Linguistic and social cues for vocabulary learning in Dual Language Learners and their English-only peers



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### ABSTRACT

This study examined teachers' (n = 29) linguistic and social cues and the vocabulary skills of Dual Language Learners (DLLs) and their English-only peers (5- to 6-year-olds; n = 226). Videotaped observations of classrooms serving high numbers of children from low-income and ethnic-minority backgrounds were coded for syntactic complexity (linguistic cues) and gestures (social cues). Students' expressive vocabulary was measured in kindergarten (fall, spring); receptive vocabulary was used to determine risk status. Results revealed that, controlling for fall scores, teachers' syntactic complexity positively predicted spring scores for DLLs and EO students. Follow up analyses revealed that teachers' syntactic complexity positively predicted spring scores for children not at risk for language and literacy difficulties. Gestures also positively predicted students' vocabulary outcomes. Findings suggest that the classroom language environment can be experienced as promoting to the extent it provides responsive language support for word learning.

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The steady U.S. demographic changes over the years are reflected in today's public school classrooms where students from ethnic-minority backgrounds are a group on the verge of becoming the majority (Krogstad & Lopez, 2014). Public school enrollment statistics also indicate that 51% of students are from low-income backgrounds (Southern Education Foundation, 2015). A large and growing number of ethnic-minority students are Latino school-age children, a quarter of whom are Dual Language Learners (DLLs; children who speak a language in addition to English; Fry & Lopez, 2012) and over a quarter of whom live below the poverty line (Macartney, Bishaw, & Fontenot, 2013). Latinos have also been overrepresented in the lower levels of the academic achievement distribution, for example, with approximately 50% of Latino students in 4th grade scoring "below basic" in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Underlying these results showing Latinos' low reading performance is that a substantial proportion of Latino DLLs (37%; Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011) receive English language services at school due to their limited-English proficiency

(often referred to as English Language Learners; ELLs). Thus, a substantial number of DLLs in public schools are in the process of learning to read in a language in which they are not yet proficient.

Indeed, research highlights the importance of well-developed oral language skills, for example vocabulary, in preventing reading difficulties for DLLs (Hoover & Gough, 1990), similar to their English-only (EO) peers (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2008; Snow et al., 1998; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). In response to the evidence of a link between early vocabulary development and later reading success, there has been an increase in the number of curriculum intervention studies focused on vocabulary instruction in the early grades (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Biemiller & Bootte, 2006; Coyne, McCoach, Loftus, & Kapp, 2009). Recent meta-analyses show that while these interventions lead to overall positive effects on vocabulary, they are less effective for children with weak vocabulary skills (i.e., at risk for reading difficulties) and from low-income backgrounds (Marulis & Neuman, 2013). These findings suggest that vocabulary interventions may not be powerful enough to close the achievement gap and instead, may exacerbate achievement differences between children from high and low-income backgrounds as well as between children who are and are not at risk for reading difficulties. Of note, there is limited research—albeit growing—on the impact of vocab-

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ulary interventions on the language skills of DLLs (see Lonigan & Shanahan, 2010), who are a heterogeneous group of learners varying not only in terms of English proficiency (ELL vs. non-ELL), but, for example, risk status (at risk vs. not at risk). Thus, there is a limited understanding of how children may respond differentially to classroom-based language supports as a function of their language status (DLL vs. EO) and status for being at risk (e.g., at risk vs. not-at risk).

In general, there has been a limited research focus on the existing classroom-based language supports for building vocabulary skills, despite the recent adoption of standards-based practices that call for increased attention to classroom-based language exposure and use (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010). As posited by the Emergentist Coalition Model (ECM; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Hollich, 2000) of word learning, the learner relies on a “coalition” of information sources in their linguistic environments for learning words. For example, as children mature, the social (e.g., gestures) and linguistic cues (e.g., vocabulary, syntax) made available in the environment become prominent sources of information about words. Yet, while there is an extensive literature-base on early word learners’ sensitivity to the existing social and linguistic cues in their home environments (Hart & Risley, 1995; Rowe, Özçaliskan, & Goldin-Meadow, 2008), less is known about the influence of linguistic and social cues made available by teachers in the classroom (Dickinson, Hofer, Barnes, & Grifenhagen, 2014). In particular, questions remain regarding the social and linguistic cues that promote language learning in classrooms serving children from historically underserved communities, which include students who are ethnic minority and come from low-income backgrounds as well as those who are at risk for reading difficulties. Thus, in the current study, we examine the extent to which existing social and linguistic cues in the traditionally underserved kindergarten classroom—characterized as ethnically diverse and low income (based on eligibility for free- or reduced-lunch; FRL)—influence the vocabulary skills of young children, in particular, DLLs as well as children at risk for language and literacy difficulties.

## 1. Theoretical framework for studying children from minority backgrounds

The theoretical framework that guides this study on how social and linguistic cues shape language development among children from ethnic-minority and low-income backgrounds is Garcia Coll and colleagues’ (Coll & Szalacha, 2004; García Coll et al., 1996) integrative model of minority children’s development. This model stems from classic bio-ecological and “interactionist” theories of child development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Bruner, 1978; Snow, 1994; Vygotsky, 1934) that conceptualize development as a consequence of social interactions, particularly with more knowledgeable persons (e.g., teachers), who build and expand on children’s current language skills. The uniqueness of the integrative model lies in the fundamental assumption that the child’s social position (e.g., race, ethnicity, social class), and the promoting or inhibiting nature of the environments with which the child interacts (e.g., homes, classrooms), indirectly affects development. In this view, classrooms may be experienced as inhibiting environments if they are plagued by poverty, and simultaneously be experienced as promoting if they provide responsive linguistic and social supports for building language. Classrooms may be experienced as promoting environments when they offer access to the type of language that mirrors the language they are expected to comprehend in text. For instance, classrooms that are promoting may offer access to sophisticated vocabulary and complex syntax

(Schleppegrell, 2012; Snow & Uccelli, 2009), along with the appropriate scaffolding that leads to the independent use of this type of language.

Consistent with the syntactic bootstrapping hypothesis (Landau & Gleitman, 1985; Naigles, 1990), the sentence structure that surrounds words provides clues to their meaning. Thus, hearing words in various syntactic structures should help learners figure out the meanings of new words and also multiple meanings of words already known. A long line of research with very young children that reveals the unidirectionality of the relationship between the complexity of caregiver’s speech and children’s syntactic skill provides support for this hypothesis. In a recent longitudinal study of caregiver–child interactions, Huttenlocher and colleagues (Huttenlocher, Waterfall, Vasilyeva, Vevea, & Hedges, 2010) coded for the syntactic complexity of parents’ and children’s speech. They found that while the relative frequencies of the different syntactic structures to which parents exposed their children were similar across parents, there was wide variation in terms of the overall syntactic complexity of the parent’s speech. That is, some parents provided children with more complex speech than others did. What’s more, caregivers’ syntactic complexity predicted children’s subsequent syntax, yet children’s syntax did not predict later caregiver speech.

The use of social cues may also provide meaning support by visually representing the concepts to which words refer. For example, *representational* hand gestures reflect imagistic information (e.g., actions, spatial relations), and often provide additional meaning information not found in speech (McNeill, 1992). Consider how a hand gesture portraying “catching” affects the listener’s interpretation of the following complex sentence: “The zookeeper wanted to snare the crocodile because he wanted to put it in a cage.” While syntactic bootstrapping (e.g., onto the phrase “because he wanted to put it in a cage”) may provide clues as to the meaning of the low-frequency word “snare,” its use along with the “catching” gesture, which provides a visual representation of a “trap,” may aid in arriving at the correct meaning. Indeed, complicating the task of word learning is its arbitrariness (Bloom, 2005; Quine, 1960); there is no “natural” connection between the linguistic form of a word and its meaning. Gestures as well as sophisticated words and complex syntax may clarify the relation between word labels and their meanings, thus leading to a more robust understanding of word concepts.

### 1.1. The influence of classroom-based linguistic cues on language development

Existing research showing more rapid language growth during the school year than over the summer months (Huttenlocher, Levine, & Vevea, 1998) highlights the classroom as a potentially language-promoting environment. Specifically, linguistically-detailed analyses of teacher–student interactions in preschool classrooms reveal that children exposed to more syntactically complex speech (i.e., a higher proportion of complex sentences) by their teachers show greater language growth over the school year (fall minus spring scores) than children exposed to more simplified speech (Huttenlocher, Vasilyeva, Cymerman, & Levine, 2002). Of primary importance to the present study, Huttenlocher et al.’s (2002) study represented a range of socio-economic (SES) backgrounds (high, low), which was related to children’s fall scores, but not their growth scores. Moreover, the authors found that while teachers’ syntax was related to their students’ language growth, it was not related to their students’ SES. They interpreted these findings as indicating that children from low-SES backgrounds may exhibit as much or more growth than their peers from high-SES backgrounds when their teachers’ provide complex speech. This finding substantiates the claim that teachers’ speech plays a critical

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