



Language and literacy instruction in preschool classes that serve Latino dual language learners[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The present investigation builds off prior empirical work to describe the quality of the language and literacy instruction Latino dual language learning (DLL) children receive in Head Start. Specifically, we measured the frequency and duration of language and literacy lessons in classes that enrolled large numbers of Latino DLLs. We also investigated children's opportunities to participate in high-quality language and literacy experiences as a part of their everyday instructional experience. In total we observed 398 lessons in 20 classes. Results revealed (a) that the frequency and duration of instruction was variable, with some children enrolled in classes that implemented language- and literacy-based lessons for 23 min (10%) of the 4-h day and others in classes that fit in up to 82 min (34%) of instruction per day; (b) when language and literacy instruction occurred in these classes, it was most frequently delivered in a whole group and featured an instructional style that was characterized by the teacher directing the children to answer basic questions with a one- or two-word response; and (c) that high-quality instruction, which we operationalized as instruction that promoted language development, was predicted by characteristic features of the lessons—not features of the classroom. These results provide information that is useful to inform the design of policy- and practice-based interventions that might improve the characteristics of the language and literacy environments that serve Latino DLL children.

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1. Introduction

Over six million Latino children in the US currently live in poverty; this represents the largest group of children, delineated by ethnicity, living in poverty in our country right now (Lopez & Velasco, 2011). An ecological theory of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) helps illuminate the fact that children who grow up in under-resourced homes and in under-resourced communities may be academically vulnerable based on their limited exposure to academically enriched environments. Fortunately, a robust foundation of research indicates that high-quality early education programs can be a powerful intervention for these children (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993; Snow, Tabors, & Dickinson, 2001; Yazejian, Bryant, Freel, Burchinal, & The

Educare Learning Network Investigative Team, 2015; Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

Head Start, for example, is a federally-funded early childhood education intervention that provides access to free preschool for children whose families qualify as earning at or below the Federal Poverty Guidelines¹ and that has been shown to have lifelong benefits for participating children. These benefits are both social and personal; they include better health outcomes and higher levels of educational attainment (Deming, 2009). These broad outcomes are the result of a purposeful effort to provide academically vulnerable children with access to rich and engaging learning environments.

The provision of enhanced opportunities to develop early language skills is one mechanism of the early childhood education setting that has been shown to predict positive academic development among children from under-resourced homes (Tabors, Snow, & Dickinson, 2001). Prior research clearly demonstrates that early language skills are critical for the development of later literacy

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¹ More information on the Federal Poverty Guidelines and Head Start eligibility can be retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/mgmt-admin/eligibility-enroll/income/PovertyGuideline.htm>.

(e.g., Tabors, Snow, et al., 2001; for a review, see Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), and that strong language and literacy skills provide groundwork necessary for school achievement across content areas. For these reasons, academically vulnerable children have much to gain by participating in high-quality preschool language environments that foster their language and literacy development. Education researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers, therefore, have long been concerned with identifying and replicating high-quality early education practices that support the development of language and literacy skills, particularly in programs that serve academically vulnerable children.

Questions remain, however, as to how effectively Head Start promotes the development of these skills for the students who attend their programs, and in particular, for the growing population of children who are also Latino dual language learners (DLLs; Castro, Pérez, Dickinson, & Frede, 2011). By DLLs, we mean children who come from homes in which a language other than English is spoken, such that these children are balancing the development of dual languages due to their exposure to both English and their home language. In fact, the recent *Report to Congress on Dual Language Learners in Head Start and Early Head Start* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services DHHS, 2013) clearly articulated the need for more research to guide policy and practice efforts aimed at increasing the care and education provided to our nation's youngest DLLs. Specifically, the authors noted: "On the nature of services offered to children and families, we are not able at this time to describe the content, duration, and intensity of all types of services in as much detail as desired (DHHS, 2013, p. 94)."

Therefore, the present study aims to address this gap in knowledge by focusing on the language and literacy environment that Latino DLL children experience in Head Start classrooms by expanding the scope of prior investigations completed in similar settings (i.e., Jacoby & Lesaux, 2014). Specifically, we approached this task by measuring the frequency and duration of language and literacy lessons in Head Start classes that enrolled large numbers of Latino DLLs. We also investigated children's opportunities to participate in high-quality language and literacy experiences as a part of their everyday instructional setting in Head Start. Results from this study build upon prior work in similar contexts (i.e., Jacoby & Lesaux, 2014) and provide information that is useful to inform the design of policy- and practice-based interventions that might alter the characteristics of the language and literacy environments that serve Latino DLL children such that we improve the learning trajectories for this population.

2. The contribution of language environments to literacy development

A robust body of prior research demonstrates the reciprocal relationship between language and literacy development. From research with English-only speaking children, we know that early language experiences, both at home and school, contribute to the development of later literacy skills (e.g., Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Hart & Risley, 1995; Snow et al., 1998; Tabors, Snow, et al., 2001). Seminal studies in the field have demonstrated that children's vocabulary knowledge in the primary grades relates to their reading comprehension skills as adolescents (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). We also know that early childhood literacy practices, such as adult-child shared book reading, contribute to the growth of children's vocabulary knowledge (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pelligrini, 1995; Juel, 2006; Mol, Bus, & de Jong, 2009; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). In this way, we understand the relationship between language and literacy as a reciprocal one, with early literacy experiences predicting language growth and early language development predicting later literacy skills.

Though these associations are frequently documented in research, linguists posit that there is something about the nature and quality of language environments – beyond just the number and variety of words used by adults and subsequently learned by children – that underlies the relationship. Using the pragmatic view of language development (Ninio & Snow, 1996) as a foundation, Uccelli, Hemphill, Pan, and Snow (2006) provided a framework to explain this relationship. A pragmatics-based framework advances the idea that one's language and literacy proficiencies are in large part influenced by one's history of language and literacy socialization. Through this language and literacy socialization, different individuals develop different arrays of strengths and weaknesses in their use of written and spoken language. These particular areas of strength and weakness reflect the opportunities an individual has had to participate in particular ways of using language and engaging with texts.

One language practice that has been shown to be positively associated with literacy is *extended discourse* (Tabors, Snow et al., 2001). Extended discourse is a term for talk between adult caregivers and children that "requires participants to develop understandings beyond the here and now and that requires the use of several utterances or turns to build a linguistic structure, such as in explanations, narratives, or pretend" (Snow et al., 2001; p. 2). Those children who are regularly exposed to and participate in extended discourse are better set up to comprehend academic texts because engaging in extended discourse, such as narratives or explanations, prepares students to understand and produce language that is closer to the language of texts (Uccelli et al., 2006).

3. Preschool language environments

The relationship between extended discourse among children and adults and later reading outcomes has been most clearly demonstrated by the Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development (HSSLD; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). This study followed 74 monolingual children from low-income backgrounds in their home and school settings from age 3 through age 6. A major contribution of the study was that it demonstrated that preschool language environments accounted for nearly half of the variation in English-speaking children's language and literacy skills in kindergarten, after controlling for the effects of the home language environment (Dickinson, 2001). This research suggests that an excellent preschool language environment – one characterized by a teacher who frequently engages children in extended discourse – could influence children's receptive vocabulary and emergent literacy skills (Dickinson, 2001).

In prior work, we explored the likelihood that Head Start teachers would engage in extended discourse with Latino DLL children (Jacoby & Lesaux, 2014). In that investigation, we found that 22% of the observed language and literacy lessons yielded extended discourse exchanges between teachers and children. More work is needed to understand the nature and quality of this teaching and learning environment, such that we can understand how to better support extended discourse in Head Start classes that enroll DLL children. The present study expands upon our prior work by observing a much larger sample of Head Start classes; and it contributes additional information to explain the features of this instructional environment that foster extended discourse between teachers and children.

Other research also advances this notion of the importance of the classroom language environment for children's language development. Huttenlocher, Vasilyeva, Cymerman, and Levine (2002) found that growth on measures of syntactic language skills among English-speaking children were related to the proportion of syntactically complex sentences their preschool teachers used.

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