



Promoting the contributions of multilingual preschoolers



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 July 2015

Received in revised form 9 April 2017

Accepted 9 April 2017

Keywords:

Preschool

Multilingual children

Instructional Conversation

CREDE model

ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the use of Instructional Conversation (IC) in a multilingual preschool context. It sought to identify scaffolding strategies that promoted the contributions of multilingual children to IC. Twenty-seven hours of video data from seven classrooms were analyzed. Only three sequences emerged in which multilingual children actively contributed to the conversations. Educators in these sequences promoted children's contributions by: (a) using multimodal resources, (b) responding to the actions and words of the children, and (c) focusing on shared meaning-making or intersubjectivity. Translanguaging emerged as an important strategy to encourage the involvement of multilingual children in IC. Results provide invaluable exemplars of effective IC in preschool classrooms with multilingual children. The results demonstrate alternative ways of talking with young multilingual children and indicate a need for a pedagogical focus away from teacher-directed practices to joint activities and responsiveness to children's contributions.

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1. Introduction

In the United States, by 2020, it is estimated that the number of preschoolers who speak more than one language, or multilingual children, will outnumber their English-only peers (Maxwell, 2013). Several states, such as Hawai'i, have schools where multiple languages are spoken, versus only one dominant additional language (Education Commission of the States [ECS], 2013). Research is needed to identify strategies for working in such circumstances (De Jong & Harper, 2005; Walker, Shafer, & Iiams, 2004).

Research on education in linguistically diverse contexts is needed at all grade levels, but especially preschool. This critical time in the development of a child lays a foundation for future school success (Buysse, Peisner-Feinberg, Pérez, Hammer, & Knowles, 2014; Gormley, 2008). There are concerns that many pre-K programs are not equipped to work with linguistically diverse children (ECS, 2013). To address these concerns, I researched scaffolding strategies (Bruner, 1978), or assistance used by educators working with multilingual children in an English-medium setting. I used video data from classrooms and was granted consent to share the videos, making the data visible and accessible to help bridge research and practice. The results provide examples of how educators scaffold multilingual children's contributions to preschool classroom discussions and illustrate why such practices are important.

This study was part of an on-going project between the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence Hawai'i (CREDE) and the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Children's Center (Children's Center) (Goh, Yamauchi, & Ratliffe, 2012; Yamauchi, Im, & Schonleber, 2012b; Yamauchi, Im, & Mark, 2013). The purpose of the project is to support early childhood educators' adoption of pedagogy for linguistically and culturally diverse children. The CREDE pedagogy promotes educators' use of contextualization, or integration of children's prior cultural, community and home-based knowledge (Wyatt, 2012/2015; Yamauchi, Wyatt, & Taum, 2005), small group instruction (Wyatt & Chapman-DeSousa, 2015), and complex thinking (Yamauchi, Im, Lin, & Schonleber, 2012). The model has been shown to improve learner outcomes (Doherty, Hilberg, Pinal, & Tharp, 2003; Estrada, 2004; Hilberg, Tharp, & DeGeest, 2000). At the K-12 level, use of the model benefited children learning English (Institute of Educational Sciences, 2006; Saunders & Goldenberg, 2007). There has not been research on the model at the preschool level that focuses on multilingual children.

A hallmark of the CREDE model is the use of Instructional Conversation (IC), or small group interactions between educators and children in which the children participate as much as the educators. ICs have been shown to support children's language and literacy development (Au, 1993; Institute of Educational Sciences, 2006). An IC is both conversational and instructional. Participants build upon each other's turns while discussing a concept (Yamauchi, Im, Lin, & Schonleber, 2012; Yamauchi, Im, & Schonleber, 2012). Without high degrees of contributions from the children, IC does not work.

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Educators have expressed that engaging children, especially multilingual children, is challenging (Goh et al., 2012). Research indicates that interactive conversation in diverse preschools is an underused strategy (Justice, Mashburn, Hamre, & Pianta, 2008; Massey, 2003; Miller, 2010). There is a need to identify examples of fully enacted IC in linguistically diverse preschools to analyze the contributions of children and practices of educators to discern strategies that promote multilingual children's contributions. Therefore, I analyzed 27 h of video data from a linguistically diverse preschool and interviewed educators to determine, (a) the prevalence of IC, (b) the contributions of multilingual children during ICs, (c) strategies educators used to promote the contributions of children who were multilingual. The results provide examples of how ICs work and why they are important in linguistically and culturally diverse preschools.

Hawai'i is an ideal location to study linguistically diverse classrooms. Approximately one-in-four people speak a language other than English at home, a higher proportion than the national average (Research and Economic Analysis Division, 2016). In this study, families at the preschool reported using 33 distinct languages (J. Bock, personal communication, March 29, 2016). Nearly half of the children at the preschool speak a language other than English at home. The four most predominant languages other than English are Hawaiian, Japanese, Korean, and Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese).

These children are not just learning English, but are developing multiple languages. For this reason, I use the term multilingual to describe the children over other commonly used labels such as, English Language Learners (ELL) or English Learners (EL), Limited English Proficient (LEP), or Dual Language Learners (DLL). The terms ELL or EL emphasize the students' needs; yet, what is problematic is that such labels create a paradigm that focuses on learners' deficits (García & Kleifgen, 2010). LEP, often used in legal documents, is an example of a term that situates a child as having a problem, when, from an asset-based perspective, knowing another language and learning English can have many social, cognitive and academic benefits (Castro, García, & Markos, 2013). DLL is an asset-oriented term often found in the early childhood literature. DLL does not privilege English over other languages and emphasizes that children are developing dual languages, something that is an asset. I come from the same asset-based perspective; however, I prefer multilingual to situate the children as users of multiple languages—sometimes two, sometimes more.

I am also choosing to use the term multilingual because I am working from a sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978). According to this perspective, learning is shaped by social interactions, in which information is shared and meaning negotiated. As a result of these interactions, individuals appropriate words and knowledge, shaping their perspectives. I want to focus my thinking, and the thinking of readers, on the resources and strengths children bring to classroom interactions. There is agreement from educational researchers working from diverse perspectives informed by sociocultural theory, anthropology, psychology, and applied linguistics that for development to occur, educators need to link new information to children's prior knowledge from their homes and communities (Cummins, 2007; García, 2009; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Rogoff, 1990; Rymes, 2010; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978; Wyatt, 2015). Children's home languages are essential parts of their communicative repertoire and prior knowledge. This prior linguistic knowledge could be used in classrooms to make connections between prior experiences and new academic content. For this reason, I use the term multilingual as it calls attention to the linguistic assets children bring to school.

Multilingual children have diverse perspectives and languages that could contribute to classrooms and society. However, many immigrant and multilingual children are being underserved by schools (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2015). The results of

the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed an achievement gap between multilinguals, referred to as English language learners, and their peers. This gap was essentially unchanged from the NAEP 2003 scores (Office of English Language Acquisition, 2016) indicating that the compliance driven approach to education fueled by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), enacted in 2002, has not made a substantial impact on the achievement gap.

Improved educational outcomes require a shift from focusing on compliance to examining and addressing the complex factors that affect learning, such as student contributions (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). From a sociocultural perspective, contributions to interaction are essential to learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978). Development occurs when children interact and negotiate concepts with more knowledgeable others, such as peers, teachers or coaches (Rogoff, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Participants share focus and purpose during these interactions, which leads to mutual understanding is termed intersubjectivity. Children's contributions to interactions are essential for intersubjectivity because educators need to know what children are thinking, and vice versa, to establish a shared understanding. It is through the contributions of each participant that misconceptions can be addressed, questions are raised and that new ideas and communication strategies emerge. Understanding how to promote children's contributions is especially important for working with preschool multilingual children because they are an underserved population with unique communication strategies and needs. They are just starting school and may be unfamiliar with social norms. Multilingual children have different linguistic tools to draw upon than do their English-only peers.

The aim of this research is to identify strategies that promoted the contributions of multilingual children to Instructional Conversations. I focused on children's contributions and used this term instead of other commonly used terms like engagement or participation, to situate this work within a sociocultural framework (Stetsenko, 2009) and emphasize the role of learner agency. Learner agency refers to the locus of control as being within the learner versus depending on an external source for direction. It represents a shift away from learning as acquisition to learning as *doing* (Donato, 2000; Sfard, 1998; Stetsenko, 2009). A learner could be engaged but not necessarily motivated to do so by curiosity. When students start asking questions, they exhibit learner agency and contributions. Such moments reflect opportunities for cognitive engagement and critical thinking.

Contributing expands on the notion of engaging because it emphasizes the idea that students are choosing to supply relevant information to the interaction. When contributing, children are focusing upon and adding to interactions in partnership with the educator to establish intersubjectivity (Rogoff, 1990). Adults encourage this joint focus and partnership by connecting their comments to what children are doing and saying. This action communicates to the children that the conversation is a shared experience, enhancing intersubjectivity, encouraging more contributions and ultimately language development (Tomasell & Farrar, 1986 as cited in Rogoff). The importance of such interactions for learning and development has been established but the practice has not been adopted on a large scale in preschools that serve linguistically and culturally diverse children (Justice et al., 2008; Miller, 2010), pointing to the need for continued work on bridging research and practice.

1.1. Pedagogy for culturally and linguistically diverse learners

The application of sociocultural theory to support educators working with culturally and linguistically diverse children, in which classroom interactions are emphasized, has been an area of focus for educational researchers for many years and is an

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