

Promoting Early Language and Literacy Development in Young Dual/English Language Learners

Young Dual/English Language Learners in Rhode Island

Young children who are learning more than one language simultaneously (e.g. their native language and English) either at home or in the community are referred to as Dual Language Learners (DLLs) or young English Language Learners (ELLs). Young children who are monolingual native language speakers are not officially considered to be DLLs or ELLs until they have an opportunity to learn English.¹ Young ELLs need early and ample opportunities to develop literacy skills in both languages, yet often opportunities to build English language skills and foster bilingualism are missed due to current systems and structures.²

As of September 1, 2014 in Rhode Island, there were 4,690 children younger than age 5 (below kindergarten entry age) who had been born to a mother who did not speak English, 9% of the population. Of these children, 80% were born to a mother who spoke Spanish.³

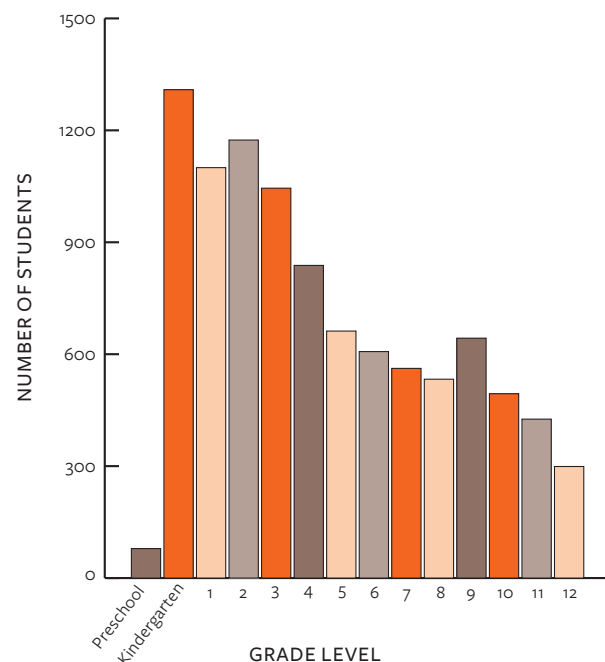
Mother's Language at Birth (Non-English), Children under Age 5
as of September 1, 2014, Rhode Island

Maternal Language (Non-English)	Children Under Age 5
Spanish	3,739
Portuguese	208
Chinese	99
Khmer (Cambodian)	95
French	74
Laotian	43
Russian	15
Haitian Creole	14
Hmong	10
Italian	1
Other	392
TOTAL	4,690

Source: Rhode Island Department of Health, KIDSNET Database.

Data about young children who are learning English are difficult to find. Available data undercount the actual number of young children whose home language is not English. Children who need support to learn English are not identified by the state as English Language Learners until they enter public school, usually in kindergarten or later. As of 2012-2013 in Rhode Island, there were 79 children in public school preschool programs identified as ELL while there were 1,309 children in public kindergarten identified as ELL.⁴ Young children may also begin learning English through enrollment in Head Start, child care or other early learning programs. In the 2013-2014 school year in Rhode Island, 24% of the children enrolled in Head Start lived with families whose primary language was not English.⁵

English Language Learners by Grade Level,
Rhode Island Public Schools, 2012-2013



Source: Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012-2013 school year. Number of English Language Learners is the number of students who were actively enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) or bilingual education programs. Students who were not yet fully English proficient but have exited ESL or bilingual education programs to regular education are not included in these numbers.

Rhode Island Landscape

As in the nation, Hispanics are the fastest growing ethnic group in Rhode Island and Spanish is the most common language for ELLs enrolled in public school (76% of ELLs spoke Spanish in the 2012-2013 school year).⁶ Although most ELLs in Rhode Island speak Spanish as a native language, many Hispanic children in the state grow up fluent in English or fluent in both English and Spanish and do not require additional support to learn English in school. As of 2010 in Rhode Island, there were 45,940 Hispanic children in Rhode Island, 21% of the population under age 18. In comparison, only 7% of Rhode Island public school students in preschool to Grade 12 were classified as English Language Learners (all languages).⁷

Socioeconomic Status

Nationally and in Rhode Island, many young ELLs are raised in low-income homes. In Rhode Island, 88% of ELLs enrolled in public school are enrolled in free or reduced price lunch, which means their family income falls below 185% of the federal poverty level, or, an annual income of \$36,131 for a family of three.^{8,9} Research indicates that living in poverty and having limited access to early education are the most important factors impacting achievement of young ELLs, not the fact that their first language is something other than English.¹⁰

Academic Achievement

Standardized test data indicate the existence of an academic achievement gap between children identified as ELL and non-ELL in older grades. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2013, ELL students in Rhode Island in grades 4 and grade 8 scored lower than non-ELL students on both reading and math.^{11,12} A recent report by the Latino Policy Institute found that the NAEP scores of Rhode Island's ELLs were among the lowest in the country.¹³

Key Initiatives in Rhode Island

The Rhode Island Department of Education has developed *The Rhode Island Early Learning and Development Standards (RIELDs)* and *Dual Language Program Standards* to guide early care and education practices and to inform the development and implementation of dual language programs in the state. RIELDs outlines research-based and developmentally appropriate stages for language development for dual language learners, including learning in home language, switching between home language and English, and proficiency in English. The *Dual Language Program Standards* outline seven strands that reflect the major components of dual language program planning and implementation to ensure the quality of dual language programs across the state.

Language Acquisition in Young Children

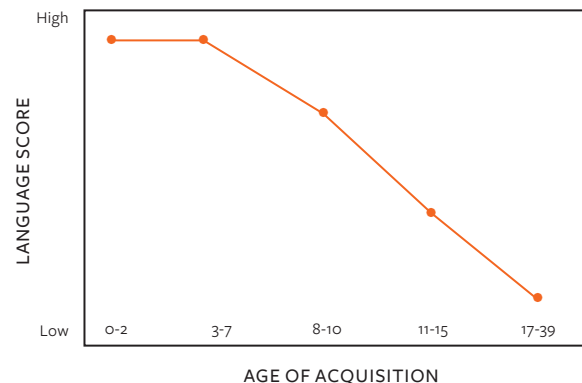
Language development starts even before a child is born. During the last trimester of pregnancy, babies can hear their mothers' voices and learn important information about the rhythm and sounds of their mothers' language. After they are

born, children from families of low socioeconomic status (SES) often hear less speech than their higher SES peers. In addition, the complexity of the speech they do hear is often lower, placing them at a disadvantage when learning language.¹⁴ By age 3, children from very low-income families have vocabularies less than half the size of children whose parents are working professionals.¹⁵

Bilingual Language Acquisition

The common scientific consensus is that there is a "window of opportunity" in childhood for learning a second language, with younger children having the greatest potential. This means that learning another language is easier for younger children than older youth and adults.¹⁶ Several studies have indicated that children who acquire a second language before puberty demonstrate the same level of expertise as a native speaker, including mastery of pronunciation and grammar. Older youth and adults may learn vocabulary in a second language at the same rate as younger children, but have more difficulty mastering pronunciation and grammar.¹⁷

Second Language Skills by Age



Source: Kuhl, P.K. (2011). Early Language Learning and Literacy: Neuroscience Implications for Education. *Mind, Brain, and Education*, 5(3), 128-142.

Monolingual vs. Bilingual Children

Young children's ability to acquire the words and grammatical structures of the language spoken around them persists even if they grow up hearing multiple languages. There are differences between bilingual language development and monolingual (one language) development, but children who are exposed to two languages from birth will not be "confused" or any more likely to have a language disorder. It is normal for both bilingual children and adults to mix the two languages together when they speak.¹⁸ On average, bilingual learners speak their first word slightly later than monolingual learners, but still within the normal range.¹⁹ A bilingual child may have a smaller vocabulary in each individual language than a monolingual child, but their vocabulary between both languages is the same as or greater than a monolingual child.²⁰

Though public dialogue often focuses on challenges that ELLs face, a growing body of research suggests that bilingual infants, children and adults experience cognitive benefits that extend beyond the realm of language, particularly in the area of executive functioning. One study found that preverbal bilingual children (7 months) exhibited higher levels of executive function than their monolingual same-aged peers.²¹ Other studies have found that bilingual school-aged children have advanced skills with cognitive control, flexibility, working memory tasks, attention, and inhibitory control, which can ultimately aid bilingual children in a school setting.^{22,23,24,25} One possible explanation for these findings is that children who are bilingual have to process two languages by code-switching and dealing with the representations of each language which could help with cognitive flexibility.²⁶

Learning In Two Languages

Rhode Island's large population of young children whose first language is not English presents both an opportunity and a challenge for the state. These children are well poised to acquire two languages, but they also may enter early educational settings with lower levels of English compared to their monolingual peers.

There has been debate in the field about the best approach to educate children who do not speak English as their first language. This issue is potentially challenging because of the diversity of languages and amount of language exposure that young children experience before entering preschool or kindergarten (since not all children have access to preschool). Educators agree that all children need to learn English in order to participate in civic life in the United States. Increasingly, educators are also recognizing that it is important to maintain and develop a child's home language, but it can be challenging to do so. All children, regardless of home language, benefit from high quality language exposure that includes extended talk on a single topic, opportunities to converse with adults, exposure to complex language and enriching group discussions.²⁷ Young children who speak a language other than English at home should have exposure to both their home language and English to develop academic, social, and cultural knowledge in both languages and to benefit from their early onset bilingualism.²⁸

Schools choose to educate their ELLs in a number of ways that vary by time, place, teacher, target language, pedagogy and goals. Many schools use English as a Second Language (ESL) programs and Structured English Immersion (SEI) as ways to educate ELLs and to assimilate students as quickly as possible.²⁹ These programs do not typically utilize a student's primary language and are not considered bilingual programs.

In Rhode Island, 84% of ELLs enrolled in public school are enrolled in ESL programs. The remaining 16% of ELL students are enrolled in dual language programs.³⁰ Also considered bilingual, these programs provide literacy and content instruction to all students through two languages and promote

bilingualism and biliteracy, grade-level academic achievement, and multicultural competence for all students.³¹

Bilingual education theory and empirical studies provide evidence that ELLs benefit both academically and socially from bilingual education that utilizes a student's home language.^{32, 33} Bilingual education in preschool is considered an additive to children, not subtractive, meaning that non-native English speakers benefit from further development of their home language.³⁴

Research has shown that exposing children to their home language in school in some capacity supports higher levels of English achievement in the short and long term.³⁵ Early childhood educators (even if they are not bilingual) can adapt instructional practices to better support young English language learners by using culturally familiar materials in the classroom, establishing effective partnerships with parents, incorporating and building on each child's prior conceptual and language knowledge, providing as much individualized and small group instruction as possible, and continuously monitoring each child's language development.³⁶

Recommendations

- Recognize the early childhood years are a critical period for language development and work to ensure all children have strong early language development in at least one language.
- Enhance early childhood screening and data systems to identify young dual/English language learners before kindergarten entry.
- Expand supports available for non-native English speakers from birth until they enter kindergarten to ensure strong language development. Support instruction for ELLs in their home language while also supporting their English language development.
- Expand access to publicly-funded, high-quality early learning programs and work to ensure young children who need support to learn English, particularly those from low-income families, have opportunities to enroll.
- Provide professional development and training to early childhood teachers and caregivers on specific instructional strategies that are culturally and linguistically appropriate and promote language development.
- Develop more bilingual/dual language education programs that span preschool through third grade.

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