

## Meeting the Challenge of Second Language Learners

by Judith Colbert

*Katie's new child care group is challenging; several of the children are second-language learners. As either immigrants or the children of immigrants from many different countries, they are each learning the language of their parents at home while struggling with English in their child care setting. It isn't a new challenge for Katie. She is used to having a few second-language learners in her group. Most often, they have been Hispanic and over time, she had learned a little Spanish. This year, although the groups include some Hispanics, most of the newcomers are from Asia or Africa. Somehow, she will have to provide them with a meaningful, high quality program every day, and do her best to get the older children ready for school.*

Katie is not alone, nor is she wrong thinking that there are more newcomers now, and that they have more varied backgrounds than in the past. Researchers report that the children of immigrants are the fastest growing component of the child population; one in five children in the United States lives with at least one foreign-born parent (Capps et al., 2005; Matthews & Ewen, 2006). In addition, the racial/ethnic composition of the immigrant groups is changing. Although the majority of the children are still from predominantly Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, immigrants now speak "a multitude of languages" and arrive in the US from countries of origin that "span the globe" (Matthews & Ewan, 2006, p. 5).

Furthermore, Katie is right to describe her goal in terms of readiness for school and future outcomes. Limited language proficiency (LEP) is a barrier to achievement at school. Since most English language learners (ELLs) are immigrants, many are from families whose characteristics include factors associated with lower performance in school, such as low incomes, limited English, and little formal education (Capps et al., 2005, p. 2). Not all immigrant groups have the same characteristics. Garcia et al. (2006) report, for example, that Hispanic children, the largest immigrant group, achieve at much lower levels than the non-Hispanic white majority and Asian Americans.

The need to meet the challenge of second language learners is increasingly urgent in preschools and other early childhood programs. Garcia et al. (2006) concluded that "the early childhood years provide possibly the best window of opportunity" for improving the academic future of young Hispanics; they also say that "high quality preschools can improve the school readiness of many children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds." They point to the need for a better educated workforce, noting that "linguistic and cultural understanding is critical for teachers" and expressing concern – in the case of Hispanic children – at the lack of Spanish speaking professionals (pp. 139-140).

### What Can You Do?

A better educated, multi-lingual early childhood workforce is better equipped to meet the challenge of serving second language learners and their families. If you are working with young newcomers, you can get more information and better tools to provide culturally appropriate care for all of the children in your group.

You can take advantage of professional development opportunities and resources and incorporate what you learn into your daily program. Although providing care in every child's language may be beyond reach, you can learn about and respect the languages and cultures of the children in your group and their families.

Many researchers see relationships among language, culture and cognitive development (Garcia, 2005). They believe that as children learn a language, they also come to understand their social situation and improve their thinking skills. From their perspective, first language development is a foundation for further knowledge. Second language learners bring with them not just knowledge of their home language, but also ideas about their world that are shaped by their cultural experience. To teach them most effectively, therefore, it is important to respect what they already know, and instead of trying to replace it, build upon it.

The first task is to observe the children; watch how they interact with their parents, and be conscious of how parents interact with you and with the child care setting. Be open-minded. Do not assume that what you are observing means the same thing to them as it does to you.

Establish a foundation for second-language development and new knowledge by supporting home culture and first language learning. Even if you do not speak the languages of the children and families, you can introduce some words into your setting. You can also help families understand the importance of ensuring their children learn their first language at home.

### Introducing Words from Home

Find out about a child's first language. Ask another speaker of the language how to welcome and comfort the child in his or her own language; learn a few key words. If possible, record the parent saying or a few words to the child or singing a familiar song. Look for commercial recordings (for example, DVDs) in that language and play them. Hearing familiar words will comfort the child in times of stress and help "bridge the gap" between home and the child care setting.

### Working with Families

Let parents know the importance of building on foundation skills learned at home and the value of interacting with the children in their first language. Learn what you can about their cultural background. Meet with parents where they are most comfortable – in the child care setting, in their home or in a neutral setting. Each cultural group will be different. For example, Schwartz (1996) notes that it is especially important to meet personally with Hispanic parents since face-to-face communication is more effective than written communication, even when written communication is in Spanish.

It takes time to build mutual trust and understanding. Immigrant parents may be reluctant at first; they may make a definite distinction between "school" and home and feel that they have separate roles. They may not feel comfortable speaking with their child's teacher who, in their culture, may be a figure of authority, not to be questioned. Educational settings may be intimidating, because they are very different from the schools they attended themselves or because they have little or no experience with a child care center or school. Although all parents may be conscious of their lack of second language skills, those with low education levels are likely to feel especially uncomfortable. When approaching immigrant parents, it is therefore important to consider their experience in early

childhood settings and the potential for embarrassment that stems from differences in customs and abilities, including language skills. Work to establish a positive climate for interactions and learning new ways. If the challenge seems too great, ask someone to act as a translator.

### **Meeting Readiness Goals**

When the National Education Goals Panel (1995) established criteria for school readiness, they organized them within five categories, including both social and emotional development, and approaches to learning:

1. Physical well-being and motor development.
2. Social and emotional development.
3. Approaches to learning – dispositions to use skills.
4. Language development – verbal language and emerging literacy.
5. Cognition and general knowledge.

All early childhood programs use non-verbal strategies to ensure that children like being in a group learning situation and develop dispositions to use the skills they acquire there. They also provide physical activities. Even when first-language resources are lacking, programs can still help children make gains in language development and general knowledge.

Side by side with supporting first language learning, you can promote readiness in all categories by introducing children to English through games and other activities. Playing catch with a ball, for example, provides physical exercise and is a good way to teach words like “me,” “you,” “ball,” “high” or “low.” Painting pictures or wall murals is an opportunity to name colors and introduce concepts such as “wet,” “dry,” “line,” and “circle.” Songs help children learn words without realizing it through rhythmic repetition. Group activities promote peer interactions and provide opportunities to build social emotional skills. They allow children to have fun and enjoy learning. They create situations where every child has a chance to succeed.

You can help all children, but especially second language learners, by including a variety of everyday items in your setting and taking every opportunity to name them orally and label them with clearly printed signs. If possible, items should be real and not pretend, so that children are not confused when they encounter the actual item after learning about it as a toy. For example, include a discarded real telephone, not a toy.

When real items are not available, cut out and label pictures for posting on the wall. Tell stories using picture books. Encourage children to make up stories of their own, if their language skills permit. Have a “show and tell” time when children bring favorite things from home. Use these opportunities to learn about what interests each child and what happens at home. Build on this knowledge to introduce new words and expand the child’s understandings. For example, if a boy from another culture who speaks no English brings a figure based on a well-known cartoon to “show and tell,” take his interest as a hint that he might respond to other such characters and use what you have learned to generate ideas for future activities.

Be patient as children attempt to communicate. Remember that language has a cultural component. Even when you think you are simply communicating with a word like “house,” you can not be sure that everyone will know what you mean. A child born to English-speaking parents in the United States is likely to think of a house as a structure with a roof and four walls. Some roofs may be slanted, others flat. Some walls will be built of wood or wood, others of adobe or plaster. A child from a refugee camp may have known only a paper shack or a fabric tent. You can’t be sure that someone from another culture will interpret what you say in the way that you do.

When you communicate, speak naturally. Be consistent and try to use the same words to say the same thing each time. Use a number of strategies, involving both verbal and non-verbal skills. Act out what you mean with gestures – like a game of charades. Create a puppet play to illustrate your meaning.

As you use these skills, remember that communication styles are different. Cross-cultural communication depends on varying practices that involve not just words, but also other elements such as touch, use of personal space, body movements and eye-contact. For example, some cultures favor touch while others are more reserved. Some are comfortable in confined spaces that might be unbearable for others. Some cultures encourage children to interact verbally. They value eye-contact, expressions of opinion and lively debate. Others expect children to remain silent until asked to speak. They view the lowering of the eyes as a sign of respect and do not encourage children to state their own minds. In some cultures, it is common practice to answer questions indirectly, with a long narrative story. In others, where communication is more direct, short answers with little detail are preferred.

### **Meeting the Challenge**

Given these differences, it is important to give children opportunities to communicate and observe closely as they respond. Learn from them, the strategies that will be most effective in helping them bridge the gap between what they already know and what they must learn to function in their new environment. So important is learning how to respond from others that researchers have suggested that differences in language between teachers and children are less detrimental than differences in the way language is used at home and at school and in the community (Garcia, 2005).

Second language learners are a challenge, but there are ways to meet that challenge. Go to your library, read about other cultures. Reach out to others in the language community – look for translators, ask leaders in that community about customs and language usage. Meet with parents. Build trust. If circumstances permit, ask someone from a local college, a neighborhood church or an immigrant community group to facilitate an informal meeting. Build a support network for yourself and your families. Communicate with other child care organizations, like Head Start or Pre-K, or contact your local elementary school. Work together to create a community.

Finally, recognize your limitations and your strengths. You can’t learn the language and you can’t teach English all on your own, but you can lay a foundation for development and learning and make an important contribution to positive future outcomes for all of the children, including the second language learners in your group.

**Judith Colbert, PhD**, is a consultant who specializes in early care and education who is currently developing best practices for the care of young immigrant and refugee children.

### **Resources**

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