The Right Start for Early Childhood
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Supporting Early Language Development for Diverse Learners

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The development of language skills among preschool and primary school children is crucial for success in school and life, providing a foundation for literacy development (Eunice Kennedy Shriver NICHHD, 2010). The ability to orally segment and blend sounds predicts word reading skills, and a rich vocabulary helps children gather meaning from the words that they encounter on paper (Kendeou, Van den Broek, White, & Lynch, 2009).

Part of educators' job for young learners is to support families and caregivers in the development of language skills for pre-literate and beginning readers. Schools are also a central place for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to gain exposure to and interact with academic or standardized English. Engagement in conversations, peer interactions, and reading activities have all been shown to enhance language acquisition of linguistically diverse learners (Rowe & Snow, 2020).

With COVID-19, however, the education landscape has changed drastically. Educators have the challenge of enhancing the language skills of children with whom they have little to no in-person contact. With much instruction involving home-based learning, educators will need to treat caregivers as partners in students' language development. To make that partnership productive, it's important to recognize the cultural and linguistic diversity in those home settings.

A Diverse Student Population

Schools have become increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse. Nearly a quarter (22.5 percent) of U.S. school-aged children speak a language other than English at home (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2019). Often when we think of *linguistic diversity* in schools, emerging

bilingual students or English language learners come to mind.

We argue that educators should further their notion of linguistic diversity to include non-mainstream dialect speakers—those whose first language is English, but whose dialect differs significantly from the "standard" or "mainstream" English that is typically used in schools and found in textbooks. Multiple language varieties are recognized as non-mainstream dialects of American English, including African American English, Southern American English, and Chicano English (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016). Standardized English (which is also a dialect of English) is often thought of as the most powerful (and, often, most "acceptable") language in the United States because it is associated with white, middle to higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

Culture and Language Interaction

Given the language diversity among families, how educators best support language growth during distance learning will vary. Optimal language development requires opportunities for communication as well as language models, which refer to the various ways people speak with one another (Hoff, 2006). Adult conversations, caregiver-child exchanges, and YouTube videos are all potential language models for children's developing language.

Language interaction between children and caregivers, however, may vary along cultural lines. Teachers should be aware that not all children are having the same language experiences at home, and that cultural norms and values can play a role in language interactions. The following scenarios are typical in two culturally different households when a child asks a question regarding snack time:

Child: "Why do I have to eat an apple for my snack? I want chips!"	Caregiver A: "Because fruits are full of vitamins and minerals. You need to eat them so that you can be strong and healthy."
	Caregiver B: "Because I said so."

It is not the educator's responsibility to judge either approach as right or wrong, but to remember that our job is to fill in any gaps in home language development with the understanding that we might not always have the whole picture.

Enhancing the School-Home Literacy Partnership

Schools can help families support children's language development by incorporating the following ideas into their practices:

Language Back and Forth

We want dynamic, language-rich interactions between caregivers and children. It doesn't matter what language or dialect the family is using. It's about language use and knowledge building in whatever language or dialect is comfortable. We use language to talk about the past, present, and future and to describe emotions, places, and experiences. One suggestion is to encourage storytelling with an older family member. Have the student ask the family member about an interesting event from their childhood. The teacher can then ask the student to retell the story, pointing out characters and main events.

Code-Switching

Being able to speak multiple languages or dialects is powerful. Incorporating standardized English into verbal exchanges helps develop verbal dexterity. Contrastive analysis, in which aspects of the *home* or *native language* are explicitly compared and contrasted with the *second language* (or *academic* or *school language* in the case of non-mainstream dialects) is an effective strategy for both bilingual and bidialectal speakers. For example, in African American English, overt subject-verb agreement is not required (e.g., They was leaving). However, in spoken language in more formal environments and in writing, we generally expect subject-verb agreement that aligns with standardized English (e.g., They were leaving). Contrastive analysis explicitly points out these types of differences.

Teachers must be very careful, however, in their approaches to contrastive analysis. Using words such as "correct" and "incorrect" and even "standard" and "nonstandard" may invalidate or marginalize the student's native dialect or language, which is not what we want to accomplish. It is crucial to remember that the goal of contrastive analysis is *not* the replacement of native language or dialect but the development of the ability to switch languages or dialects in different contexts. Emphasize the special power of that capability. Not everyone has it.

Language and Culturally Relevant Resources

Be able to point caregivers to resources they can access, relate to, and understand. Digital libraries and online museums offering virtual tours are great ways to incorporate various backgrounds and cultures into distance learning. Learn about culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018) to cultivate research and theory into instructional practices for students from traditionally marginalized backgrounds.

Learn as much as you can about the community in which you teach and incorporate unique characteristics of local cultures into lesson planning. Acknowledge that children can demonstrate their capabilities in many different ways and recognize that the diverse language and cultural knowledge children bring to the classroom are assets for all students.

Language diversity is the norm in our schools. Let's respect those differences as we enlist families in the joint effort of developing foundational literacy capacity. Our job as educators in the age of COVID-19 is to empower families with tools and strategies so that their diverse learners gain competence and confidence as language learners.

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