



Supporting Dual Language Learners: *The Benefits of Bilingualism*

Dual language learners are learning and developing in two languages. Teachers can support children's first languages in the classroom and encourage families to do the same at home. Here are some facts about bilingualism, some benefits of growing up bilingual, and what teachers can do to support dual language learners and their families. Bilingualism is a valuable asset for the child, the family, and society.

Benefits of Bilingualism



Cognitive

Bilinguals switch between two language systems. This makes their brains very active and flexible. Research shows that bilingualism facilitates:

- understanding math concepts and solving word problems (Zelasko and Antunez, 2000)
- using logic (Bialystok and Majumder, as cited in Castro, Ayankoya & Kasprak, 2011)
- focusing, remembering, and making decisions (Bialystok, 2001)
- thinking about language (Castro et al., 2011)
- learning other languages (Jessner, 2008)



Socioemotional

When children learn two languages, they are learning two cultures. Children who are bilingual are able to maintain strong ties with their family, their culture, and their community. Children can very effectively learn to navigate two different cultures, the one at home and the one at school.

- Bilingual children maintain their expressive ability in their first

language, which is critical to their bond with family (Wong Fillmore, 1991).

- Ties with family and culture are important in the development of children's identities (Zelasko and Antunez, 2000).



- Children raised in bilingual households appear to have better self-control (Kovacs and Mehler, 2009), and are very able to get along with others, both very important indicators of success in school.



Learning and School Readiness

Mastery of the first language can be very beneficial for dual language learners' school readiness. Bilingual children benefit greatly when they have a solid foundation in their first language. Here are some benefits:

- More flexible approaches to thinking through problems
- Ability to think and read in two different languages promotes higher levels of abstract thinking, which is very important for learning (Diaz, 1985).



- Bilinguals are better able to ignore irrelevant information, a benefit that may exist as early as 7 months of age (Kovacs and Mehler, 2009).
- Children who learn to read in their first language have a strong foundation to build on when they learn a second language. The knowledge acquired in one language transfers to their second language (Páez and Rinaldi, 2006).

- Bilingual children can achieve the same proficiency in the phonological and grammatical aspects of their two languages, just like monolingual children do in one language.
- Dual language learners are able to switch between two languages. Code switching is a typical feature of bilingual development not a sign of confusion or delay. They are simply borrowing words they don't know in one language from the other.
- For benefits of bilingualism to be seen, the child must have consistent exposure to both languages.
- Families can play a major role in facilitating language proficiency by using the language they know best with their children.



Global and Economic

Over half of the world's adults speak at least two languages (Zelasko and Antunez, 2000). In our growingly global society, speaking two languages is a very valuable skill:

- Bilingual adults have more job opportunities around the world than monolingual adults (Zelasko and Antunez, 2000).
- Bilinguals develop in two or more cultural environments with multiple sets of cultural behaviors and ways of thinking and interacting. This provides them with more skills in adapting to different expectations (Genesee et al., 2004).
- Bilingual individuals can participate easily in the global community and have access to information from many more sources.

What every teacher should know about Bilingualism and DLLs

- Babies are born with the ability to learn multiple languages. They can process and store individual sounds from different languages and show preference for language exposed to in utero. (Byers-Heinlein, Burns, & Werker, 2010).

What teachers can do tomorrow

- Encourage families to use their first language with their children. That allows them to be their child's teacher.
- Encourage families to read books, sing songs, play rhyming games, and tell stories in their first language. This keeps their cultural traditions alive and supports first language and early literacy development.
- Support the first language in your classroom – the first language is the initial language children use to learn about the world around them. Allow children to use it to communicate.
- Create an environment that celebrates children's language and culture – use songs, rhymes, and fingerplays in different languages.

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