

How Do Early Childhood Teachers Understand and Support the Needs of Young English Language Learners?

Carolina Cabezas

Elizabeth Rouse

Deakin University

Abstract

In Australia, over one third of all children in Early Childhood programs speak a first language other than English. Despite considerable work into teachers' beliefs on cultural diversity, attention to aspects of second language acquisition in the Early Years has been limited within the Early Childhood field. This paper reports on a small study investigating how four early childhood educators understand theory of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and bilingualism, and how they cater for language-minority students in their programs. The findings revealed a complex interplay between the way participants interpret and support the needs of these children, their experience in the field, and professional education. The teachers in the study reveal various perspectives on how SLA and bilingualism manifest during the early years, and how they affect the learning of children with a Language Background other than English (LBOTE). The teachers also seemed to rely on experiential and intuitive approaches in planning and teaching English Language Learners (ELLs). This study brings new perspectives to understanding the nature of teachers' beliefs and practice regarding English language learners.

Keywords: English language learners, second language learners, early childhood, teacher practice, teacher education

Corresponding author, ¹lrouse@deakin.edu.au

Introduction

There has been considerable research undertaken over the past few decades exploring effective teaching practices for language-minority students in early childhood classrooms (Bodrova & Leong, 2001, p. 7; Cummins, 2000; Facella, Rampino, & Shea, 2005; Garcia, 1983; Krashen, 1981; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Kuhl, 2004). In Australia, the national framework that guides professional practice in Early Childhood Education (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009) identifies “Equity and diversity” (p.11) as one of its foundations, and highlights the importance of educators respecting, honouring, and adequately responding to children’s expertise, ways of knowing, languages, and cultural traditions. This article argues that while this is identified as a clear practice principle for early childhood educators, teachers may have limited theoretical understanding of second language acquisition and bilingualism in the Early Years, which hinders their ability to effectively plan, implement and assess according to the specific learning and developmental needs of ELLs.

This article reports on findings from a small scale study investigating how four early childhood educators understand second language acquisition (SLA) and bilingualism in early childhood, and how they cater for the language, cognitive, social and emotional needs of English Language Learners in their programs. Analysis of the findings identified that the educators in the study had ambiguous understanding of SLA and bilingualism in the Early Years to guide their practice, and instead relied heavily on experiential and intuitive approaches in their teaching.

Literature Review

English Language Learners in Early Childhood Classrooms

Early childhood classrooms in Australia are increasingly seeing more children arrive at kindergarten with a valuable resource: a home language other than English (hereafter referred to as L1). Typically these children are immersed in English-speaking settings, where they are educated exclusively in the second language (hereafter referred to as L2). In this context,

minority children are expected to acquire English as a second language while also developing the concepts, understandings, dispositions, and skills that will serve as platforms for their future social and educational achievement (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2008, p. 7). The VEYLDF outlines that by the time children enter school, should “have already developed key communication, learning and thinking skills, learned to build and maintain relationships; and formed a strong sense of their identity” (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2009, p. 5). Nonetheless, the *Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) National Report* (2009), a population measure of children’s development as they enter school, found that “21.6 per cent of children who are proficient in English and have Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE¹) status are developmentally vulnerable on one or more of the AEDI domains, compared to 93.6 per cent of children who have LOBTE status and are not proficient in English” (Centre for Community Child Health and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research 2009, p. 12). The AEDI domains include: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills (school-based), communication skills and general knowledge.

The academic and developmental success of ELLs in English speaking classrooms has been linked to the effectiveness of educational programs and teachers (Ball, 2011; Cadiero-Kaplan & Rodriguez, 2008; Fumoto, Hargreaves, & Maxwell, 2007; Gillanders, 2007; Pease-Alvarez, Garcia, & Espinosa, 1991; Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass, 2005; Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart, Sylva, Sammons, & Melhuish, 2008). Lo Bianco and Slaughter identify the effectiveness of the teacher as the ultimate target of all language education and planning,

“Good teaching is the single most important controllable variable in successful language learning and this in turn depends crucially both on the schools hosting language programs and the quality of teacher education, ultimately determined by university and federal government support” (2009, p.28).

¹ For the AEDI, children are considered LBOTE (Language Background Other Than English) if they speak a language other than English at home and/or have English as a Second Language (ESL) status. Children are considered to have ESL status where English is not their first language and they need additional instruction in English; or, where English is not their first language, they have conversational English, but are not yet proficient in English (Centre for Community Child Health and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research 2009, p. 12).

Bilingualism and Second Language Acquisition in Early Childhood

Children are capable of acquiring one or more languages during their Early Years (Kuhl, 2004). Research suggests children's ability to learn languages is influenced by their social environments, the child's exposure to the language, and the nature of language input (Genesse, 2009). Various studies categorize bilingualism as simultaneous and successive (Weitzman & Greenber, 2002; Butler & Hakuta, 2004; Clarke, 2009). The former usually takes place in homes where each parent speaks a different language, and children are exposed to learning in two or more languages since birth or before they reach the age of three (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002). The latter refers to children who start out as monolingual and begin to acquire a second language sometime in early childhood (Clarke, 2009; Genesse, 2009; Meisel, 2011).

Clarke (2009) outlines different stages of second language acquisition in early childhood: 1) continued use of home language in the new language context, and moving through the use of non-verbal communication, 2) a silent period for some learners; use of repetition and language play, 3) use of single words, formulae and routines, 4) development of productive language, and 5) metalinguistic awareness.

Lightbown (2008) asserts that second language learning in the early years is not an easy task, as it is often assumed, and argues the need for children to receive adequate input and quality-interaction opportunities in order to be able to develop multiple languages proficiently. Although children are capable of acquiring multiple languages in the preschool years, it is not guaranteed they will be more successful than older children at language learning in a school setting, nor that there will be continued development or lifelong retention of languages (Bongartz & Schneider, 2003; Lightbrown, 2008).

Collier and Thomas (1989) found "that acquisition of cognitive-academic second language proficiency does not occur quickly but is a developmental process that takes a significant number of years" (p.35). They also revealed that educational programs which emphasize the importance of continuing cognitive-academic development in both the L1 and L2, frequently yield better academic achievement of both their language-minority and -majority students compared to monolingual programs (Collier & Thomas, 1989). On the other hand, children who are immersed in English-speaking programs with no support for the development of L1

have a greater likelihood of experiencing subtractive bilingualism, meaning that their skills in L1 are lost over time, and L2 becomes their dominant language, a process more commonly known as language shift (August & Hakuta, 1998; Clyne, 2007; Jones Diaz, 2003; Lightbown, 2008).

In the Australian context, only a few immigrant Australian communities have low rates of language shift. Most communities experience subtractive bilingualism and eventual language loss of their ancestral, heritage, or community language (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009). Lo Bianco & Slaughter assert, “in a perfect model of wastefulness some children, having lost knowledge of the home language, available to the society at no cost to the public purse, are then offered the same language in schools as beginner learners of a taught foreign language” (2009, p.4).

According to MacSwain et al (2001), “teachers’ self-perceptions of cultural and linguistic competency as they relate to helping ELL children achieve academic and social potential play a powerful and intricate role in the type of educational services provided to culturally and linguistically diverse children” (p. 54). Research shows teachers’ beliefs significantly influence how they plan, organise, and implement their curricula, as well as how they perceive and respond to ELL students’ needs (Bustos Flores, 2001; Gavish & Shimoni, 2011; Hachfeld et al., 2011; Pajares, 1992; Pappamihel, 2004; Pettit, 2011; Prawat, 1992; Rueda & Garcia, 1996; Webster & Valeo, 2011). In Australia, there is a wide range of research on teachers’ beliefs regarding cultural diversity (Allard, 2006; Allard & Santoro, 2008; Fler, 2003; Jones Diaz & Robinson, 1999; Oliver, Y, & Grote, 2009), however the literature specific to English language teaching and learning in early childhood is rather scant.

Effective Practices to Support ELLs in Early Childhood Classrooms

It is widely accepted on the basis of pedagogical and developmental theory (Cummins, 2009) that literacy skills gained in L1 facilitate the acquisition of L2. Grant (1992) asserts that teachers must develop ‘best practices’ for teaching ELLs which include cultural sensitivity and awareness; learn to understand the home and community life of children; develop group techniques to foster the learning styles of all children; determine an adequate approach to multicultural education (as cited in Rutledge, 2010). Other helpful teaching strategies include:

high expectations of the child, active use of language integrated with concept development, concept development supported in L1, rich and supportive classroom environments, comprehensive staff development, active support from parents and community (Samway & Taylor, 2007). Lake & Pappamihel (2003) suggest including a focus on children's cultural contexts as a method for responding to cultural and linguistic diversity; emphasising the role of conversation, acceptance, experience, and children's literature as components of an appropriate language environment for young children; understanding the stages of L2 acquisition and relevant teaching strategies for each stage; using contextual clues such as visuals, hands-on learning, gestures, labels, a print-rich environment, finger plays, songs, role-playing, show-and-tell, and other nonverbal accompaniments to instruction.

The Study

As this study consisted in exploring teacher beliefs, a qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews was deemed appropriate. The use of interviews enables the participants to reflect and provide rich insights into their thoughts and experiences (Pepper and Wildy, 2009). The study was undertaken as part of a Masters of Teaching Research Project. The purpose of the study was to identify how these early childhood teachers understand and address the needs of young English Language Learners (ELLs). The principal researcher was an International student studying Early Childhood Education in Australia. The study was undertaken with four early childhood teachers who work in sessional preschool programs in a suburb in the west of Melbourne, Australia's second largest capital city. Across this suburb, more than half of residents speak a language other than English at home (Profile.id, 2011). A sessional preschool is described as an Early Childhood education program provided for children to attend for 15 hours per week, usually over two or three days, in the year prior to starting school.

The four participants held higher education degree level qualifications and work in settings with high numbers of English Language Learners. Kathy and Pam had over 30 years teaching experience in Early Childhood teaching, Joanna had over 20 years experience, and Kelly had approximately 10 years. While the first three teachers had spent much of their teaching

careers working with ELLs, the fourth teacher had only experienced a child with English as a second language for one year. Table 1 below provides an overview of the experience of each participant.

Each participant took part in an interview lasting approximately one hour. They were interviewed in their own workplace, during non-teaching times. The interviews explored their understandings about the acquisition of English as a second language and the development of bilingualism during the Early Years. It also explored how they plan and implement Early Childhood education programs that cater for the language development needs of ELLs. The researchers used an inductive data approach to analyse the interview transcripts (Huberman & Miles, 2002), and a thematic coding process to draw out the emerging themes (Walliman, 2010).

Findings

The interview process revealed various perspectives in regards to the way young children acquire English as a second language, and the role of early childhood educators play in this process. It also showed that the knowledge teachers have in regards to this group of learners is highly reliant on their teaching experience and practice, rather than from any type formal training, and/or theoretical understanding.

Teachers Understanding of Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Two teachers (Kathy and Pam) perceived SLA as a process that manifested through different stages, however an understanding of what these stages involved, or a reflective thinking around the typology of these stages was unclear – *“In regards to children with English with a second language I know they go through different stages. They’ll go through a quiet stage, they’ll go through....you know, various stages”* (Kathy), while a Pam reported: *“I do know that these children do go through that silent period... and then some very key words started to present in their play and they would use a lot of gesture....then we get some of those key words, and then it goes into more fluid sentences, small sentences”*.

Joanna and Kelly were not able to share any knowledge about SLA. Joanna appeared to use her own observations of different children to form her own understanding of how children acquire a second language, stating: *“What I’ve noticed is the learning of language is different in all the children...Some children will stay mute...I don’t know if it’s fear they’re going to get it wrong, but when they speak they speak perfect English in long sentences...Others will talk to you in their own language and you’ll answer them in English and they will just keep talking”*.

According to Pam, aural acuity is an important element in second language acquisition, she stated *“The children have to be quite acute at their hearing, and also different inflections on your tongue...acquiring the second language requires the children to know the sound differences, to require that I’m going to speak to you using a different sound to what I speak to mum and dad”*. Joanna, also, believed that vision is an important influence in SLA, *“I suppose the sense of sight plays a big impact in what’s going on, and interpreting what’s happening, and what’s expected”*. While these teachers expressed these beliefs, there is no basis to suggest that ELL children need or have any more visual or auditory acuity than mono-language learners.

Kelly, who reported only having worked with ELLs for one year, did not have any formal training, or experiential knowledge on teaching children with language backgrounds other than English. She relied on her instinct gained as a parent of young children -*“I’m going to speak as a parent as well cause I do have children of my own. I find it [first and second language acquisition] sort of the same. Yeah, really have to go back to basics and very simple language when these children come through the service”*. However, her own background and those of her children, was not that of a second language learner, and she was making decisions based on limited understanding of language development, making assumptions without any underpinning insight into how these children learn and develop language proficiency.

None of the participants discussed the categorization of bilingualism, and most of them were unable to articulate a clear program or strategy that aimed at support English language acquisition or bilingualism development.

Table 1. *An overview of the study participant*

Teacher	Years Teaching	Years Current Centre	% ELLs	Years Teaching ELLs
Kathy	36	36	92	36
Pam	34	34	87	34
Joanna	21	3	94	21
Kelly	12	8	87	1

Proficiency in Home Language and English

Two of the four teacher participants (Kathy and Pam) perceived a relation between proficiency in home language and second language acquisition making statements such as *“Once they are proficient in their first language then the second language...we feel they will pick that up easier”* (Kathy). Pam believed that *“It’s really important that you hold on to your home language, cause if you know one language really well, research has shown that they will pick up English very easily”*, reflecting a simplistic belief that portrays children being able to ‘easily’ learn English as a second language, rather than appreciating the complexities of simultaneous and sequential bi-lingualism, and their implications on the teaching and learning of ELLs.

Interestingly it was Kathy, the teacher with the most years of experience, who commented - *“I find that the children that the parents have tried to teach them English before they get here are the ones that have problems, as I said with the correct grammar and things”* identifying that for her, the fact that children speak is more important than comprehension or confidence when using the second language. She did go on to state that she has advised parents not to *“try to make them (the children) speak English at home, believe me they will forget Vietnamese, fast enough when they into this school system, unless you keep it up...you enrich their Vietnamese language and leave the English, I’ll enrich the English and then we have the best out of both worlds”*.

While three of the teachers had considerable number of years teaching ELLs, none of the teachers reported having any formal training in SLA theory or pedagogy. Although they all perceived a course on SLA pedagogy would be ‘helpful’, none had ever taken a course on this issue, nor recalled it being part of their teacher training. Two of the teachers referred to a half-

day professional development (PD) session as an underlying source of knowledge, covering broader aspects of working with cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom, One of them recognised the importance of PD in this area, *“I think that’s just part and parcel, if I’m going to be teaching so many different cultures, I need to make sure that I find out about these families” (Pam).*

Understanding of Curricula and Pedagogies

The teachers’ perceptions regarding best approaches for teaching ELLs varied mostly depending on their level of familiarity with their learning community, the years of experience working with ELLs, and their personal pedagogies. The teachers emphasised the need for children to feel comfortable and develop a strong sense of trust and belonging as a foundation for SLA, *“That’s a really first point of call with a lot of the children that have got English with a second language, to get that secure attachment with them ...Once they feel that they have a sense of belonging and they are respected here everything else will follow through”* and *“So this is their first exposure to this sort of program, so for them to trust is big”* being indicative statements that represented the beliefs of all four teachers.

The teachers were asked to outline the strategies they used to engage with the children in learning and support them in their acquisition of English as a second language. All four teachers identified using visual aids for routines, working with bilingual teaching aids, and the use of cultural artefacts to create relevant environments; the use of gesture and other non-verbal language; role modelling and one-one interactions. The three more experienced teachers also identified using action songs and learning simple words and phrases in the children’s home language. Some of these strategies are presented by Lake & Pappamihiel (2003). However, other helpful strategies that researchers conclude as best practice for teaching ELLs are in ELL early childhood classrooms are designed to support English language development are conversation, using open ended questions in conjunction to story reading (Scull, Paatch & Raban, 2013), the active use of language integrated with concept development, and concept development supported in L1 (Samway & Taylor, 2007). The following table (Table 2) summarises the strategies mentioned by the teachers as their teaching approaches for ELLs. The shading denotes which teacher identified and incorporated

Table 2. *Teaching strategies identified by the participants for working with ELLs*

Strategy	Kathy	Pam	Joanna	Kelly
Visual routine, aids & artifacts				
Use of gesture & non-verbal language				
Role-modeling language				
Use cultural artifacts				
Action songs				
Learning words and phrases in home language				
Encourage parents to speak home language				
Books & songs in other languages				
Pick up and extend on key words				
Keep activities basic enough for them to engage				
Praising use of language				
Encouragement to join peers				
Prompting language				
Encourage parents to read in home language				

each strategy. Most of these strategies seem to be drawn from overarching early childhood pedagogies and theory, and do not appear to be targeted pedagogies specifically for teaching ELL children. In the interviews the teachers were unable to identify specifically the basis of their curriculum approaches for ELL children, or how they differentiate their teaching to cater for children who are learning English as a second language.

Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that there is interplay between the experience of the teachers in working with ELLs, and their level of professional understanding in areas of study

such as SLA and relevant pedagogies. This study revealed different depths of the teachers' knowledge about SLA and bilingualism in the Early Years. All teachers seemed to plan and implement their practice with ELLs, based on experiential learning, or general Early Childhood pedagogies, rather than an underpinning theoretical knowledge. For teachers to cater for children who are learning English as a second language, and effectively help them achieve academic and social competence as discussed by MacSwain et al (2001), it is necessary to develop knowledge and capacities concerning the teaching of English as a second/additional language. None of the four participants recalled studying anything related to ELLs, SLA, or teaching English as a second language through their teacher training courses, and all of them heavily relied on beliefs and understandings they had gained solely through working with ELLs over the years. It has been suggested that curricula in pre-service teacher education courses should be redesigned to include more knowledge on SLA, multiculturalism, and specialised TESOL pedagogies (Premier & Miller, 2010; Webster & Valeo, 2011; Weisman & Garza, 2002; Zepeda, Castro, & Cronin, 2011) so that teachers are equipped to provide relevant curricula and pedagogies for this ever increasing group of learners. In the absence of this formal training the teachers in this study relied on a few hours of a professional development program. This situation highlights a need for formalised training for teachers in understanding the theory and practice of working with ELLs.

While the teachers who had more years of experience teaching ELLs had more articulated notions regarding stages of SLA, the importance of home language maintenance, and the advantages of bilingualism, the teacher with no experience (Kelly) had superficial and ambiguous perspectives on these issues, and was unable to discuss her understanding of how these children learn. As was evident from Kelly, the lack of theoretical understanding pertaining to SLA and pedagogies for ELLs, lead her to generalise and make assumptions about the ways in which children acquire a second language and how to best support their language. All the teachers affirmed a belief that, by being immerse in English-speaking classrooms most ELLs should be able to easily pick up English and develop enough proficiency before they enter school, a view which is not supported by the literature (Bongartz & Schneider, 2003; Lightbown, 2008; Genesee, 2009).

In keeping with research on the importance on maintaining the home language for children's social and emotional development (Kagan & Garcia, 1991; Tannenbaum, 2005;

Wong Fillmore, 1991), all the teachers demonstrated awareness of the significance of L1 maintenance, and emphasised the need to encourage the use of L1 at home. The teachers recognised the role of L1 in the development of children's sense of identity, the preservation of family and community values, and the ability for children to communicate with parents and elders. However, the four teachers' had varied understandings of the significance of L1 on academic development and achievement. The more experienced teachers (Kathy, Pam, Joanna) acknowledged the fact that preschool children are still in the process of developing their L1, thus believed support in L1 literacy development was necessary not only at home but also in the classroom, however only two of the teachers (Kathy, Pam) outlined using books in children's home language in the classroom, and only the most experienced teacher (Kathy) purposefully encouraged families to read to the child at home in their home language. Kathy also viewed the academic development of L1 for ELLs to be as important as the academic development of English for English-speaking children. Conversely, the other teachers did not see themselves as having a role in supporting, or providing a space for the learning of L1 in the classroom, and rather they just focus on helping children learn English because that is 'what the parents want'. The lack of comprehensive theoretical understanding of issues relating to the teaching English as a second language, SLA, bilingualism, and ELLs, denotes a gap in the teachers' capacity to implement programs that more specifically address the language development needs of children learning English as a second language.

The years of experience the teachers had working with ELLs impacted on their capacity to reflect on the best methods of teaching these children. This in turn, has influenced the approaches and strategies they incorporate into their programs. The teaching approaches Kathy and Pam had were drastically different to those of teachers Joanna and Kelly. Research identifies a strong link between teachers' exposure to ELLs, and models of multicultural education with the quality of their understandings regarding effective practices (Gandara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005; Petriwskyj, 2010; Premier & Miller, 2010). While the strategies of the more experienced teachers were in many ways mirroring those identified by Lake & Pappamihel (2003), the teachers with the least experience had more difficulty articulating their understanding of SLA and pedagogical approaches that cater for the learning needs of ELLs. In fact, Joanna and Kelly emphasised the need to keep their curriculum 'simple' or 'basic' as one of their strategies. This reveals an assumption that more complex

and stimulating environments are not relevant for ELLs, or a total dismissal of the fact that children's capabilities may be very different, and quite often much more superior, than their ability speaking English. Thus, 'simple', or 'basic' environments may signify a limit to the real potential of a child. Moreover, research has demonstrated that teachers' beliefs significantly influence how they plan, organise, and implement their curricula, as well as how they perceive and respond to ELL students' needs (Bustos Flores, 2001; Gavish & Shimoni, 2011; Hachfeld et al., 2011; Pajares, 1992; Pappamihel, 2004; Pettit, 2011; Prawat, 1992; Rueda & Garcia, 1996; Webster & Valeo, 2011). For teachers new to the profession or new to working with ELL children, reliance on experiential learning maybe flawed as they have not had the opportunities to gain appropriate experience, relying solely on personal beliefs without any underpinning theoretical understanding from which to begin.

The experiential learning gained through many years of working with these children, and access to a limited PD opportunity has provided some level of understanding to the teachers in this study. However, it is necessary to emphasise that effective teaching is a result of sound theoretical understanding and practice The teachers demonstrated minimal capacity to identify any of the theories or processes behind second language acquisition, the different types of bilingualism nor differentiate the children in their programs as representing either simultaneous or sequential bilingualism (Clarke, 2009) and hence develop pedagogies that are targeted and supportive of individual learners.

Conclusion

In the absence of formal education on ELLs, SLA, and Teaching English as a Second Language pedagogies, it is a reliance on teaching experience with ELLs which has been shown to have the most direct and meaningful impact in shaping teachers' beliefs regarding SLA, bilingualism, teaching English as a second language, and multicultural and bilingual pedagogies. The approaches used by teachers with wider experience and more professional development, while not based on any identified theoretical underpinning knowledge of SLA, bilingualism, or relevant pedagogies did demonstrate some relevant understanding of this group of learners. The teachers with limited experience working with ELLs had ambiguous

conceptions of second language learning and teaching. As a result, these teachers seemed to experience more confusion about appropriate teaching approaches, increased frustration at not being able to communicate fluently with ELL children and parents, and difficulties in assessing the language, cognitive, social, and emotional needs of ELLs.

The study, although limited, has highlighted that the reliance in building teacher efficacy through experiential learning alone may disadvantage children, as there is limited theoretical and pedagogical understanding about the needs and of ELLs in Australian Early Childhood classrooms. The study strengthens the call for including the study of SLA, bilingualism and ELLs as components of teacher education programs. There is a need for teachers to develop more comprehensive understandings of bilingual and multicultural education, as well as stronger ability to critically reflect on the teaching, learning, and assessment needs of ELL students.

As the numbers of children for whom English is not their first language continues to increase on Australian Early Childhood classroom, so should the preparation of teachers in fields that equip them to adequately respond to the needs of all children. The need for inclusion of targeted and relevant educational programs that are grounded in theoretical understanding of second language teaching and learning as a key component of teacher education courses are essential. These subjects will lead to greater understanding of curricula and pedagogies to support these learners and build not only English language proficiency but also on the holistic development of competent and confident learners.

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