



Transcript for the video:

A Study of the Play of Dual Language Learners in an English-Speaking Classroom

Narrator (over music): Learning how to interact with other children is an important life skill and a key objective of most early childhood programs. But what happens when a child arrives at preschool with limited English language skills? How do they learn to engage socially? And how can teachers support them? A recent study at the Center for Early Childhood Education explores these questions.

A Study of the Play of Dual Language Learners in an English-Speaking Classroom (0:42)

Dr. Jeffrey Trawick-Smith, Play Researcher and Study Mentor: All preschool children need to acquire social abilities in order to be successful later in life, socially, emotionally. Positive peer interactions and friendships actually predict academic abilities later in life. So, all children need to learn how to interact with peers and play in ways that are positive. This is a particularly challenging thing for a child who does not speak English well and has to find other ways to communicate with peers.

Dr. Ann Anderberg, Professor of Bilingual Education: Not having the English language in the English classroom, can really inhibit the child's opportunity to interact socially. And it really is the social interaction that scaffolds, and most oftentimes precedes, the academic acquisition of cognitive skills, of language. So really understanding what it looks like for the child in play situations is important.

Stefanie Dominguez, Principal Investigator/Undergraduate Researcher: A lot of the research that's out there about dual language learners focuses on their literacy and how they learn to read and how they learn the language. There's not as much out there on their social emotional development. There's a lot of focus on how we help them learn to read, but not as much as how we help them learn to be a friend.

Stefanie Dominguez: I wanted to look at dual language learners in an English-speaking classroom and see if the way they play was any different than the way the other kids who only spoke English played. So I wanted to see if their play differed at all and if their interactions with teachers differed at all than their English-speaking peers.

Methods (2:23)

Stefanie Dominguez: I looked at videos of different kids and just kind of watched how they played with other kids, how they interacted for about 20 minutes at a time. And then I went through, and I broke them up into units of play. And then I categorized each of those different units that I found—things like approaching another child, or a child approaching you, or just kind of playing by yourself. And then I compared how often those categories popped up for the dual language learners and for the English-speaking kids.

Findings (3:02)

Stefanie Dominguez: Dual language learners engaged in cooperative play about half as often as their English-speaking peers did and spoke and had actual conversations far less as often as their English-speaking peers did. They didn't often initiate things. They had a really hard time coming up with the words, "Will you play with me?" So a lot of times, they relied on their teachers to help initiate that.

Teacher: Nelson wants to play with you. He wants to be your friend – amigo. Tu amigo.

Dr. Anderberg: It makes sense, when you understand second language acquisition, that young children would engage in less cooperative play, unless they have an adult scaffolding, for them, that interaction. That's very predictable, given that they may be going through a silent period; they may be at these early pre-production stages.

Stefanie Dominguez: They often needed the teachers to kind of step in and help them figure out how to talk more and how to play together nicely.

Teacher: Ask Shannon.

Child: Shannon? Shannon, do you have pizza?

Stefanie Dominguez: So those are referred to as "teacher-assisted interactions," where the teacher would come in and maybe invite another friend to play, or give them a suggestion of words they could use to invite someone to join them.

Teacher: Heizan, Nora has a question for you.

Stefanie Dominguez: Or there were other times when the teacher would give them the words like, "Why don't you ask, 'Will you play with me?'" and would actually give them those words that they needed, so they would have a positive, successful interaction with their peers.

Teacher: She says, "Will you play with me?"

Implications (4:40)

Dr. Trawick-Smith: One of the most important findings, I think, of Stephanie's study was how critical teachers are. That they, more than other children in the classroom, really have an important role to play to help dual language learners to connect with their peers.

Stefanie Dominguez: When the teacher was there to help, they were able to interact. That teacher being there to assist them and being able to provide them with the tools they need, will help them a lot.

Dr. Anderberg: So when we observe that a young child is not engaging as much in the play that we've structured for them, that's a signal for the adults to enter in and to begin to scaffold that.

Teacher: What are you doing? Tell me about what you're doing.

Child: Blocks.

Teacher: What about the blocks? I see you're moving all blocks. What will you do with the blocks?

Dr. Anderberg: And to use some of the strategies like parallel talk or providing language and modeling, so that the children have the opportunity to engage more.

Child: This for the house.

Teacher: You are going to build a house with those blocks?

Child: Yeah!

Teacher: I see a yellow, amarillo, rojo.

Strategies for Teachers (5:56)

Dr. Anderberg: So, some of the strategies teachers want to use are to serve as an interpreter, to help both groups of children interact.

Teacher: Oh, I hear her asking you to play. Mia asked you to play.

Child: I want to play, too.

Teacher: You want to play, too? What will you play together?

Dr. Anderberg: They need to strategically partner their children with somebody who's going to be willing and able to engage with them and accept them into the group.

Dr. Trawick-Smith: Some children assume that a dual language learner is kind of unfriendly, because they never respond.

Child: You want that, Abby? Abby! Here.

Dr. Trawick-Smith: And so it's, I think, important to remember that English-speaking children also can be guided in learning how to communicate with language or gestures or in other ways with children who don't understand them well.

Teacher: Abby, could you pass him one more? Oh!

Child: Yay!

Dr. Anderberg: And they need to provide frequent breaks from the language demands. Giving them an opportunity to be quiet, to rest, to not have language demands put upon them.

Dr. Anderberg: I think the opportunity in preschool for children to learn to play and the social interaction is really paramount. You don't want to delay that until after they've acquired language. It needs to be part and parcel, hand-in-hand of the process of language acquisition. It'll make the language acquisition more efficient, more meaningful, and it will help the child's development, socially, to be part of the classroom, part of the community.

Stefanie Dominguez: At three, four, five years old, they're still going through a lot in learning how to interact with other kids. So by giving them the tools that they need, whether it be the words, "Will you play with me?" or a way that they can use their body to show that they want to play, those skills are something kids aren't going to get on their own. So having the teacher there to assist them and give them those skills will help them to have more positive, successful interactions in the future.

Child: Can I play?

Child 2: Yeah.