Center for
Early Care and Education Research
Dual Language Learners

Issues in Conducting Research with Dual Language Learners: Summary from Listening Sessions

Overview

CECER-DLL conducted a series of listening sessions to obtain information concerning the most pressing research needs related to the early care and education of DLLs. This brief focuses on issues that were raised related to gaps in knowledge and challenges in conducting scientifically sound research on young DLLs' development and learning. Between March and October 2010, four listening sessions were conducted at early childhood conferences with a wide variety of participants, including researchers, practitioners, state administrators, and policy-makers.[1] Based on discussions across sessions, the following themes were identified.

Key Themes

1. **A variety of terms are used in research to describe children with a home language other than English.** The diverse terminology used to describe young children whose speak a language other than English at home has created confusion in the field. Such variation limits the ability of researchers to clearly define their samples in comparable ways and to allow for appropriate comparisons across studies. "Dual language learner" was suggested by most participants as the preferred term because it describes young children simultaneously learning English while also learning their home language, thereby capturing developmental issues related to bilingual language acquisition for young children. An unresolved issue is whether the term DLL is appropriate for use over the developmental course, or whether other terminology (e.g., English language learner) would be more appropriate for describing language acquisition in older, school-age children.

2. **Research on DLLs is currently limited by a lack of consistent methods for determining a child's language status and documenting language skills in first (L1) and second (L2) languages.** This limitation prevents researchers from documenting their samples in consistent ways that allow comparisons across different research studies. Recommended procedures for determining a child's language experiences and skills include documenting language exposure, use, context, and quality in L1 and L2; measuring language skills along a continuum; obtaining information to understand a child's language background (e.g., immigration status, length of residence in the U.S.); and using multiple sources of data (e.g., parents, teachers, direct assessment). Multiple sources of data reduce risks associated with exclusively relying on parental reports, including obtaining responses that are socially desirable or that reflect parents' preferences and decisions as opposed to children's actual language exposure.

3. **Research should account for the heterogeneity of the DLL population in sampling, procedures, analysis, and interpretation of findings.** The heterogeneity of the DLL population (e.g., wide range of language and cultural groups, variations in language skills and exposure across L1 & L2) presents numerous challenges in research. Such challenges include locating appropriate assessment instruments, ensuring culturally sensitive and valid research procedures, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data, and interpreting findings appropriately. These challenges result in exclusion of DLLs from data collection or analysis due to lack of measures and small sample sizes.

4. **Researchers should consider how requests for sensitive information may affect the robustness of the research methodology.** The concerns of research participants around providing sensitive information can negatively affect sample recruitment, retention, and protection of confidentiality that could compromise the quality of the research. There are several reasons why researchers may collect sensitive information about DLLs and their families. For example, in order to conduct research on immigrants' access to services, it would be necessary to gather information on immigration status. Yet, such requests could affect participants' willingness to enroll or remain in a research study, and there may even be legal obligations for the researchers to report some types of data to state or federal agencies.

5. **Research on DLLs can be enhanced by incorporating strategies to ensure that studies are culturally valid.** Historically, there has been little attention to ensuring the cultural validity of research conducted on DLLs. Including individuals with "insider knowledge" of the sample (e.g., ethnic minority researchers, community members) in designing and implementing the study may yield useful feedback for improving the cultural validity of the research. Examining relevant bodies of research using other methods or from other disciplines may inform decisions around study design that result in more culturally valid research. For example, cross-linguistic research on monolingual children may be useful in examining DLLs from different cultural groups and in disentangling constructs that are confounded with bilingualism. ●

UNC | FPG CHILD DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE