



Implementing Whole- and Small-Group Experiences for Multilingual Learners

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According to the 2024 report *A New Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum* from the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, “As the knowledge base concerning the language development of multilingual learners has continued to expand, it is increasingly being used as a foundation to support and guide the development of early childhood curriculum.” Through intentional planning, educators can implement strengths-based, playful, and language-rich approaches that address specific learning goals for all children.

In our research and publications, we (the authors) focus on the early literacy experiences of children in biliteracy learning environments, where children read and write in more than one language. We also serve as assistant superintendents at the Freeport Illinois School District, where children enrolled in our district's bilingual program develop in their home languages and in English. In our roles, we support preschool and elementary educators as they intentionally align instruction with curriculum goals and honor children's linguistic assets, including during whole- and small-group experiences.

Here, we share examples from bilingual prekindergarten and kindergarten classes to discuss how educators can leverage the benefits of different formats to foster dynamic and inclusive learning experiences. While we focus on multilingual learners' oral language development in this article, the instructional approaches we share can be used to address various content learning goals.

The Importance of Oral Language Development for Multilingual Learners

Emergent multilingual children do not develop their languages as two separate monolingual systems. Instead, the languages are interconnected, creating a range of skills and knowledge multilingual children can draw upon to make meaning. Each child's oral language development follows a unique path and requires authentic, individualized approaches.

Oral language development is an important component of an early literacy curriculum and contributes to future literacy learning and success for all children. For multilingual learners, research underscores the link between their oral language skills and their later reading comprehension. It also emphasizes the role of instruction. Promoting oral language skills requires intentional planning for both child- and teacher-directed experiences, including engaging discussions; songs, rhymes, and movement games; and strategies and materials like sentence stems, prompts, and open-ended questions. Educators can also observe and assess

children's oral language development in both whole and small groups to gauge and support children's growth over time.

Assessing Multilingual Learners' Oral Language Development

By combining informal observations with formal assessment tools, we have been able to support teachers in crafting intentional practices for their bilingual classrooms. Through our work, we have learned that assessing oral language development requires dynamic and multifaceted approaches tailored to individual learners' languages and cultural heritages.

Observing children in both whole-group and small-group settings provides a rich understanding of multilingual learners' abilities to communicate and comprehend in their different languages. Early learning educators can use structured observations and anecdotal records to document key milestones, such as vocabulary use, sentence complexity, and conversational fluency, in authentic and meaningful ways. For example, they can

- › Collect language samples of children's communication skills during interactive storytelling, whole- or small-group discussions, and interactive play
- › Provide enjoyable, low-stress ways to assess oral language during role-playing, story retelling, and language games
- › Observe social interactions during collaborative tasks or self-directed (free) play for language use, problem solving, and navigating social situations

By assessing multilingual children's oral language skills during different parts of the learning day, educators can gain a comprehensive understanding of their development.

(Click the lightbulb for additional suggestions on how monolingual educators can support multilingual learners.)



Fostering Multilingual Learners' Oral Language Development During Whole-Group Time



Well-planned whole-group time is a key part of the learning day that occurs during relatively short time periods. When educators intentionally choose whole-group activities and materials that are inclusive and engaging, they can foster multilingual learners' language development, social skills, and sense of belonging. Gathering as a whole group also allows educators to check for children's understanding, prepare for small groups, and reinforce daily routines.

Incorporating Familiar Experiences into a Read Aloud

In Isabel's bilingual prekindergarten class, the children are engaging in an interactive read aloud of the Spanish-language book *¿Lobo, estás?*, by Bernardita Ojeda.

Isabel gathers the children on the carpet and explains, “Hoy vamos a leer sobre un lobo y sus amigos animales. Ellos se están vistiendo y cantan una canción. Vamos a hacer la misma pregunta una y otra vez, como en el juego! ¿Saben cómo hacemos la pregunta en este juego? (Today we're going to read about a wolf and his animal friends. They're getting dressed and singing a song. We'll ask the same question over and over again, just like in the game. Do you know how we ask the question in this game?)”

The children are curious. They giggle and shake their heads. Isabel continues, “Déjenme mostrarles. Va así: ‘¿Lobo, estás?’ Y el lobo responde. ¡Vamos a intentarlo juntos! (Let me show you. It goes like this: ‘Wolf, are you there?’ Then the wolf answers. Let's try it together!)”

In Isabel's warm and welcoming setting, the children's language skills are nurtured through playful interactions and materials, including those described in this vignette. She designed an interactive read aloud of an intentionally chosen book to encourage the children's language practice and active participation. *¿Lobo, estás?* is based on a traditional song that is well-known in many Spanish-speaking communities and is often recited while playing a game. Isabel knew that the children in her class had played it before or had similar family traditions involving singing, rhythm, and repetition. Her knowledge of the children and their families allowed her to connect their home- and community-based experiences with this oral language learning experience.



Using Interactive Storytelling to Nurture Oral Language Use

As Isabel reads *¿Lobo, estás?*, she pauses at key moments to model the wolf's actions. She playfully pantomimes putting on a jacket, socks, shoes, and so on. Each time she pretends to put on a new item of clothing, she encourages the children to do the same and invites them to talk about what they wear.

Isabel: El lobo se está poniendo su chaleco. (The wolf is putting on his vest.) (*Pretends to put on a vest and looks to the children.*)
¿Qué usas tú cuando te vistes? (What do you wear when you get dressed?)

Children: ¡Yo me pongo una camiseta! (I wear a shirt!)

Isabel: ¡Sí, una camiseta! Igual que el lobo. (Yes, a shirt! Just like the wolf.)

Isabel also uses the rhythm of the words and repetition of phrases to invite the children to chant along as she reads.

Isabel: Ahora, vamos a preguntarle al lobo otra vez, “¿Lobo, estás?” ¡Cantemos juntos! ¿Listos? (Now, let’s ask the wolf again, “Wolf, are you there?” Let’s sing together! Ready?)

Children: (*singing the question enthusiastically*) ¿Lobo, estás? (¿Wolf, are you there?)

Whole-group activities that provide children with opportunities to sing, role-play, and use dialogue, like this interactive read aloud, can be particularly powerful in multilingual early learning settings. Embedded oral language experiences offer educators information about how multilingual learners communicate socially and create meaning in group settings. They can also offer opportunities for educators to observe children’s *receptive language skills*, or how well they understand questions and instructions.

During a different whole-group session, Isabel reread *¿Lobo, estás?* and supported the children’s retelling of the story. As she had done during the first reading, she paused at moments and encouraged the children to role-play as the characters while they repeated dialogue from the book. Then, during a whole-group discussion, she asked the children to describe their clothing using a sentence structure patterned on the dialogue. In addition to the skills mentioned above, this experience allowed Isabel to observe the children as they used vocabulary words, spoke in complete sentences, and followed along with the story’s events.

Encouraging Language Practice Through Conversation

After reading the story, Isabel encourages the children to talk with one another about getting dressed. She says, “Ahora, vamos a hablar. ¿Qué te pones tú cuando vas afuera? ¡Díselo a tu amigo! (Now, let’s talk. What do you wear when you go outside? Tell your friend!)” The

children turn to one another and begin speaking. As they talk, she listens to learn if and how they use vocabulary from the story and practice the same sentence structures.

Ana: Yo me pongo la chaqueta para salir.
(I put on my jacket to go outside.)

Nicolás: Yo tengo botas. (I have boots.)

Isabel: (*smiling*) ¡Muy bien! Te pones la chaqueta y las botas. ¡Estás listo para el frío, igual que el lobo! (Very good! You put on your jacket and boots. You're ready for the cold, just like the wolf!)



Research highlights that meaningful conversation expands children's vocabulary and narrative skills and deepens their content knowledge. It also spurs deep thinking, academic language, and social and emotional skills. The children in the above vignette were able to connect an event described in the book (getting dressed) with one of their daily routines. Isabel also encouraged children to try out different vocabulary and sentence structures while they talked with one another.

Conversations among multilingual learners can add to an educator's understanding of their oral language growth. To extend and deepen multilingual learners' conversations, educators can implement strategies such as modeling and scaffolding phrases ("I think . . .," "Because . . .," and "Can you explain more?"). Additionally, through open-ended questions ("What do you notice about this?" or "Why do you think that happened?"), educators can stimulate learners' thoughts and ideas to increase whole-group participation. (Click the lightbulb for additional ideas to scaffold learning during an interactive read aloud.)

Next, we explore approaches to address a specific learning goal within a small-group format.



Fostering Multilingual Learners' Oral Language Development During Small-Group Time

Well-designed small-group activities can provide multilingual learners with individualized instruction connected to their interests, strengths, and needs. Small-group experiences can also actively engage each child's attention and curiosity. In addition, educators can tailor observations and informal assessments to support specific learning goals. (Click the lightbulb for additional suggestions on planning small groups for multilingual learners.) In this section, we share how Alex, a teacher in a bilingual kindergarten classroom, provided language and literacy instruction during a small-group activity.

Using a Small-Group Lesson to Implement Targeted Instruction



Alex works with Julian, Sofia, Sara, and Hector at the kidney-shaped table he uses for small-group instruction while the rest of the children work independently on reading and writing activities and at centers. He has prepared picture cards with one-, two-, and three-syllable words in Spanish, such as *sol* (*sun*), *me-sa* (*table*), *si-lla* (*chair*), and *man-zan-a* (*apple*). He explains to the children that their goal is to say the whole word smoothly by blending the parts of each word.

He pulls out the card for *mesa*. To emphasize the parts of the word, he points to each syllable and elongates the sounds each makes. “Esta palabra tiene dos partes: /me/ y /sa/. (This word has two parts: /me/ and /sa/),” he says. Then



he shows the children how to blend the parts into a single word by decreasing the pause between them.

After modeling this strategy, he invites the children to try. The children go through the same process, which they complete when Alex says, “¡Vamos a unir las: me-sa. Ahora díganlo conmigo. (Let’s put the parts together: mesa. Now say it with me.)”

“Mesa,” the children reply together.

Research shows that syllable segmentation is a predictor of successful reading in Spanish. Previously, Alex had observed that the four children in the group displayed difficulty combining syllables when reading familiar Spanish words. He used small groups to provide targeted instruction. He began the lesson by helping the children identify syllables. Then he showed them how to blend the syllables together. He used cards as visual aids and modeled decreasing pauses between his pronunciation of each syllable. Alex gave the children the opportunity to practice with his support, which helped them gain greater confidence as they worked with these sounds.



Applying a Multimodal Approach

As the activity continues, Alex demonstrates how many syllables the word *manzana* (apple) has. He pronounces the word slowly, clapping with each syllable. Then he tells the children, “Let’s try it together.”

Eager to follow along, they clap as they repeat, “Man-za-na.”

Next, Alex gives each child three tokens and a handout with three sound boxes—one for each syllable of the word *manzana*. As children say a syllable, they push a token into the corresponding box.

After they use the tokens to identify each sound, Alex invites them to share how many syllables they think *manzana* has and documents their answers on a small whiteboard. He also helps them respond in complete sentences.

As the lesson continued, Alex introduced vocabulary words with three syllables to deepen the children's ability to recognize and pronounce individual sounds in the words. He offered visual ways (picture cards, sound boxes) and physical ways (clapping, moving a token) for the children to interact with these concepts. He also modeled language using sentence stems. Because Alex implemented multiple approaches to engage, the children were able to demonstrate the learning goals in multimodal ways.

Observing and Responding During Small-Group Instruction

As Alex works with the children, he notes aspects of their oral language growth, such as the fluency of their responses when using sentence stems and how they use vocabulary words when talking with him and one another. He also observes how each child segments and blends syllables during the lesson.

When he sees that Julian and Sofia need additional practice segmenting syllables, he uses hand gestures to emphasize the break between sounds. When he sees that Sara and Hector need additional support combining syllables into words, he uses tokens to further illustrate the idea. He tells them, “Vamos a empujar las fichas juntas y decir la palabra *silla* con fluidez. (We’re going to push the tokens together and say the word *silla* fluently.)” The children push the tokens together, faster each time, as they repeat the two syllables, si-lla, until they’re eventually saying a single word.

As their time in the small group ends, he jots down notes on each child's progress.

In addition to providing targeted instruction, Alex used this small-group session to observe and informally assess each child's progression related to the learning goals. He focused his observations on how well the children understood segmenting and blending syllables as well as their overall communication during the experience. By being responsive to the feedback he gathered from moment to moment, he was able to give additional support as needed. As the session came to a close, he briefly noted each child's progress. Later, he reflected on this information as he planned future small-group experiences and new learning goals. (Click the lightbulb for additional ideas to scaffold learning about syllables.)

Suggestions for Getting Started in Your Setting



Educators of multilingual learners can tap into the benefits of whole- and small-group instruction through intentional planning, flexibility, and a focus on children's unique strengths, needs, and interests. The following suggestions can guide teachers as they create these experiences for multilingual learners in their settings:

- › **Center children's assets.** Plan small- and whole-group experiences that create shared experiences and reflect children's diverse cultures and identities.
- › **Foster language development across modalities.** Introduce shared content in whole-group activities and tailored support in small-group activities that integrate opportunities for children to listen, speak, read, and write.
- › **Intentionally promote peer interactions.** Plan collaborative whole- and small-group experiences that build children's confidence and encourage their sense of belonging.

Reflection Questions

- › How can I integrate multilingual learners' home languages and cultural knowledge across learning formats?
- › How can I equitably engage children's language knowledge and skills during whole- and small-group activities?
- › How can I gather and use information from observations and assessments to ensure that grouping strategies and my instruction are responsive to each child?
- › How can I structure whole- and small-group activities to foster collaboration and support among multilingual learners?

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