



# Association of Mexican American Educators Journal

---

A peer-reviewed, open access journal

Volume 12 Issue 1

**2018**

**AMAΕ Open Issue**

## **Editors**

Patricia Sánchez

*The University of Texas at San Antonio*

Antonio J. Camacho

*AMAΕ, Inc.*

## **Associate Editors**

Julie L. Figueroa

*Sacramento State*

Lucila D. Ek

*The University of Texas at San Antonio*

## **Enhancing Collaborative Learning: Activities and Structures in a Dual Language Preschool Classroom**

**Iliana Alanís, Ph.D.**

*The University of Texas at San Antonio*

### **Abstract**

Changing demographics have led to a need for dual language teachers to adjust their pedagogy to best meet the needs of second language learners in dual language programs. However, the development of linguistic and cognitive skills for dual language learners continues to challenge early childhood teachers (Martinez, 2010; García & Kleifgen, 2010). With this in mind, it is important to explore effective pedagogical practices in dual language programs that encourage meaningful interactions with young bilingual learners (Garcia & Garcia, 2012; Gutiérrez, Zepeda, & Castro, 2010). This study used a qualitative methodology, including classroom observations and interviews, to investigate the teacher's role in establishing students' participation when partnered in pairs. Findings reveal the teachers use of visual and auditory scaffolding, strategic pairing of students, and intentional paired learning activities to enhance collaborative exchanges.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24974/amae.12.1.375>

## **Introduction**

Latino children are the fastest growing group of the U.S. population and account for approximately 25% of all children in the U.S. More than two-thirds of young Latino children participate in early childhood education and show greater gains than other groups when enrolled in high quality early childhood contexts (Gormley & Gayer, 2005; National Institute for Early Education Research, [NIEER] 2016). The number of young dual language learners in preschool classrooms also continues to rise (NIEER, 2016). These changing demographics reflect an increase in dual language (DL) programs designed to develop young children's native language and English (Collier & Thomas, 2009). DL programs provide extensive time for the development of concepts in a child's first and second language; these programs include students from two language groups. Furthermore, in these programs, languages of instruction are separated based on time spent on each language or by content-area. Students learn the concepts by working together through cognitively challenging, culturally rich and interactive lessons or projects (Collier & Thomas, 2009). The goals are for both groups of language speakers to become linguistically and academically proficient in two languages of instruction.

Based on these goals, teachers adjust their pedagogy accordingly to meet the needs of their students (Alanís, 2013). The development of linguistic and cognitive skills for DL learners continues to challenge early childhood teachers (García & Kleifgen, 2010; Martínez, 2010). Yet, the daily experiences that children have in classrooms influences their level of bilingualism and biliteracy and affects the way they feel about themselves as learners (Alanís, 2013; Baquedano-López, Mangual Figueroa, & Hernandez, 2011). It is, therefore, critical for early childhood teachers to develop effective pedagogical practices to meet the needs of bilingual learners in DL programs (Garcia & Garcia, 2012; Garcia & Sylvan, 2011; Gutiérrez, Zepeda, & Castro, 2010). This article provides a succinct review of the literature on partner-based learning in early childhood settings and the role of the teacher, followed with analyses of classroom observations and interviews with a pre-kindergarten dual language classroom teacher in South Texas.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Using a sociocultural theoretical framework, this study examines teachers' pedagogical approaches for academic contexts, social interaction, and cultural practices (Donato, 2004; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). Scholars have established that peer interactions significantly contribute

to a constant revision of one's own cognitive system, resulting in the construction of new meanings (Bedrova & Leong, 2015; Puzio & Colby, 2013; De Lisi & Goldbeck, 1999). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) stressed the role of the more competent partner in achieving cognitive development where learning occurs when children interact with others in intentional and meaningful ways. In Vygotsky's theory of learning (1978), children's mental, linguistic, and social development is supported by more competent others within a social context known as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In this dyad, children work on a single unified task completed through the sharing of knowledge (Puzio & Colby, 2013). This often pushes learners to reorganize and restructure their thinking leading to higher levels of understanding. This interaction creates a space for children to exchange ideas and learn from each other's perspectives but often involves collaborative engagement related to language development and social identity (Donato, 2004). These rich sociocultural spaces are significant for children to develop bilingualism and biliteracy through their full cultural and linguistic repertoires (Martinez-Alvarez, Cuevas, & Torres-Guzmán, 2017).

This active view of learning coincides with early childhood initiatives that suggest the development of multiple domains through active pedagogical approaches (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Thus, classroom spaces should be active sites of learning where children develop concepts, sociocultural knowledge, and academic language (Baquedano-López et al., 2011; Donato, 2004). Although peer collaboration research has shown an enhanced academic development, research reveals teachers often use a teacher-centered pedagogy that provides limited opportunities for student engagement (Bergman & Morphew, 2014; Gjems, 2013). With this in mind, it is important to explore effective pedagogical practices in DL programs that encourage meaningful sociocultural interactions with young bilingual learners (Garcia & Garcia 2012; Gutiérrez et al., 2010).

## **Literature Review**

### **The Significance of Partner-based Learning**

Discourse and systematic interaction both play a key role in the acquisition of language and content. Thus, small group interactions increase the opportunities for cognitive engagement through discussion (Fawcett & Garton, 2005; Rohrbeck, Ginsburg-Block, Fantuzzo, & Traci, 2003). Learning in partner-based interactions has been connected to greater conceptual

understanding across subject areas such as mathematics, reading, and science as well as language development (Puzio & Colby, 2013; Ramani, 2012; Rittle-Johnson, Fyfe, McLean & McEldoon, 2013; Tarim, 2009). Successful partner-based learning relies on a dynamic use of language as children engage with each other, their own thinking, and the thinking of their classmates (Cole, 2013; Griffin, 2002; Garton & Pratt, 2001; Samaha & De Lisi, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978).

The ability to generate and maintain successful and effective oral interactions in early childhood leads to “greater flexibility; higher reading and writing competencies; more extensive vocabularies... and more effective listening competencies” (Otto, 2014, p. 20). All lead to the development of the social and academic language of school—particularly significant for bilingual learners who often enter a schooling system that fails to meet their linguistic needs (Garcia & Garcia, 2012).

Rittle-Johnson, Fyfe, McLean, and McEldoon (2013) concluded that children as young as 4 and 5 years old produced a greater number of correct responses and solutions when engaged with a partner. This research mirrors work by Fawcett and Garton's (2005), in which teachers assigned 6- and 7-year-old children to individual and paired tasks. Children who learned with a partner attained a larger number of correct responses in problem solving tasks than children who worked alone. Park and Lee (2015) examined the importance of interaction with a more knowledgeable peer and noted the use of perspective taking tasks as well as increased cognitive development with collaboration of tasks. In earlier work, Altermatt, Pomerantz, Ruble, Frey, and Greulich (2002) looked at conversations between 106 kindergarten, first- and second-grade students. Children's conversations with peers were predictive of changes in children's self-perceptions of competence over time.

Although there are few studies that focus on bilingual children's dialogue skills, Madrid, Canas, and Ortega-Medina (2007) explored ways in which 16 Spanish-English bilingual children performed on spelling assignments while working in pairs under three conditions: competitive peer tutoring, cooperative peer tutoring, and teacher-led instruction. For bilingual learners, the cooperative peer structure led to a more successful experience. Similarly, Gersten and Baker, (2000) revealed child-child interactions effectively increased English language development, particularly decontextualized language concepts found in academic texts.

## **Interaction in Early Childhood: The Teacher's Role**

In preschool, children develop the necessary social skills that provide the foundation for skills in literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional development (Ziv, Solomon, & Frye, 2008; Dickinson & Newman, 2006). Effective early childhood teachers provide opportunities for children to participate in collaborative-learning activities that promote empathy and healthy social skills (Vasileiadou, 2009). Moreover, Siraj-Blatchford, and Manni (2008) emphasize the importance of developing activities where young children can use language to support sustained shared learning. Developing skills for collaboration, however, requires providing support and guidance in order to help students learn together. Earlier research by Fawcett and Garton (2005) stressed the need to teach children interactive skills such as providing explanations and asking questions. Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004) suggest that for child-child interactions to be effective, the teacher must carefully organize the learning contexts and environment. Thus, the effectiveness of a paired learning strategy often depends on how the teacher has structured the collaborative tasks (Alanís, 2013; Battistich & Watson 2003; Dillenbourg, 2002).

Effective early childhood teachers scaffold sociocultural interactions by creating shared learning tasks, teaching children essential social skills, modeling the cognitive strategies, and encouraging reflection on the process (Alanís & Arreguin-Anderson, 2017; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2003). Additionally, teachers mediate child-child interactions by determining children's ZPD so that children are paired with a more knowledgeable other (Alanís, 2015; Fawcett & Garton, 2005).

Early childhood teachers facilitate learning outcomes when children can imitate what they see (Horner, Battacharyya, & O'Connor 2008). Research on the impact of teacher modeling reveals enhanced writing abilities (Gerde, Bingham, & Wasik, 2012) and uses of technology (Freeman & Somerindyk, 2001). Other work in early childhood classrooms, demonstrates how explicit teacher modeling helps children see what is expected of them and helps them work together more effectively (Alanís, 2013).

Lee and Buxton (2013) propose that effective bilingual teachers use appropriate linguistic scaffolding to build students' conceptual understanding and academic language skills. For bilingual learners, this requires scaffolding while children are engaged in interactive and authentic tasks (Swain, 2001). Collaborative exchanges with young bilingual children, however, has not been widely studied. Given the significance of partner-based learning for children's academic success, more research is needed that examines DL teachers' pedagogical practices when developing peer

learning in early childhood classrooms. The current study seeks to add knowledge to the types of activities and participation structures bilingual preschool teachers use to ensure successful partner-based interactions in early childhood DL classrooms.

### **Methods and Data Sources**

This study represents work from a year-long research project focused on the implementation of purposeful social interactions within one prekindergarten Spanish/English two-way dual language classroom in a multiethnic, urban elementary school in South Texas. This study used a qualitative methodology, including classroom observations, field notes, and interviews, to investigate the teacher's activities and structures when establishing students' participation in pairs. This article examines the following research question: How does one preschool dual language teacher enhance partner-based learning for effective participation and learning?

### **Context of the Study**

To address the research question, the focus was on a prekindergarten classroom of four year-olds where the teacher was using a new partner-based strategy for learning as a requirement in the two-way Spanish/English dual language program (Gomez, Freeman, & Freeman, 2005). Pairs are the ideal group size for language learning because they maximize practice opportunities for purposeful and extended talk (Alanís, 2011). Time was spent specifically observing the classroom teacher develop interactive activities for pairs working in learning centers and whole group activities.

Research was conducted in a Federal Title I campus that serves 213 students from predominantly Latino, working-class families of Mexican descent. The DL program is currently in the PreK-2<sup>nd</sup> grades with one grade level added annually. Located in a densely populated urban neighborhood, families earn a median income of \$30,192—significantly lower than the national average and less than half the average for Texas (City-data.com, 2013). According to the campus principal, “Families are predominantly third- or fourth-generation who want their children to regain their Spanish language” (Personal communication, January 22, 2016). As young Spanish heritage language learners, children arrive at the school with a strong command of English while in the process of regaining their Spanish language through the DL program.

Teachers had begun an initial implementation of the strategy of bilingual pairs. The use of bilingual pairs for linguistic and conceptual development requires teachers to assess students' linguistic and academic proficiency levels and heterogeneously partner children based on those levels (Alanís, 2013). For example, teachers pair Spanish-speaking children with English-speaking children to create a heterogeneous language pairing. Children work with their partners during large and small group interactions. Teachers adjust partner assignments based on teacher observation of children's language and development. As part of the requirement, teachers ask pairs to engage with each other on one assignment where they share the materials for the completion of the task.

## **Participants**

Purposeful sampling was used to discover, understand, and gain insight into the teacher's use of partner-based learning (Merriam, 2009). Mrs. Benavides (pseudonym), the focal teacher, was in her second year of teaching. She identified as a Mexican-American; raised bilingually but English dominant. As the English model in the two-way program, she taught English language arts to the English dominant children while the Spanish dominant children went to a partner teacher for Spanish language arts instruction.

The class consisted of a heterogeneous mix of students from varying language and socioeconomic backgrounds. All 24 prekindergarten children had varying levels of Spanish and English bilingualism. Mrs. Benavides used a Home Language Survey with information reported by parents during enrollment to determine initial language dominance. Based on this information, the class consisted of 16 English-dominant students (14 of Mexican descent) with various levels of receptive Spanish and eight Spanish-dominant students with some degree of bilingualism. Parents of all children provided consent to participate in this study as outlined in our IRB protocol.

The data collected were part of a larger qualitative case study where observational data from Mrs. Benavides' classroom was collected over one academic-year. For this analysis, observations were twice a week for two hours a day over the fall semester of 2016. Observations occurred during children's learning center time and whole group instruction and focused on the teacher's daily pedagogical practice. The data collection included: (a) two in-person interviews with the pre K teacher; one at the beginning of the study and one at the end of the study;



interviews were 20-30 minutes; (b) transcripts of weekly audio and video recordings while children were engaged in whole group and learning centers; and (c) field notes from video recordings and classroom observations. A mixture of tools were used for recording student talk, including video recordings, audio recordings, and handwritten field notes. The use of video recordings enhanced the quality and accuracy of field notes and were instrumental in studying and analyzing interactions between children. Each recording was transcribed for analysis. Pseudonyms for participants were assigned to protect participants' identity.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began with an initial coding of classroom segments of the data that answered the research question: How does one preschool dual language teacher enhance partner-based learning for effective participation and learning? The analysis process involved transcribing audio and video recordings, analyzing the teacher's instructions, documenting students' engagement with partners, and reviewing researcher field notes. Field notes and transcriptions of video recordings were analyzed in order to identify themes and patterns relevant to the research question (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Open coding of the transcriptions were followed by axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) that developed into categories related to children's engagement with their peers, recurring episodes, and the teacher's strategy.

The researcher spent considerable amount of time in the classroom before and after the data collection in an effort to build relationships with the teacher and children. Designed to develop participants' trust in the researcher, this extended time contributed to the trustworthiness of the data. In the following section, findings are organized around three salient themes related to the implementation of the collaborative learning strategy: (1) the use of teacher scaffolding, (2) strategic pairing of students and (3) intentional paired learning activities.

### **Findings**

The following describes the typical schedule of Mrs. Benavides's DL pre-k classroom, including routines such as instructional and/or content time (e.g., large and small group) and learning center time (e.g., play-based activities).

## Visual and Auditory Scaffolds

Scaffolding happened regularly and across diverse tasks (text, spoken language) and situations. Mrs. Benavides used several visual scaffolds that provided picture cues for her young learners. These included a partner chart, anchor charts, and modeling. A partner chart, using students' names and pictures, allowed children to see with whom they were partnered. She posted this chart near the front of the classroom and referred to it daily. To develop their collaborative relationship, Mrs. Benavides asked children to sit with their partners.

A second visual scaffold was the creation of anchor charts that provided cues for what learning with a partner should look like and sound like. Mrs. Benavides created these visuals as a class activity with children providing their own ideas. She sat her 4-year olds on the carpet and asked them to tell her what they thought “working with a partner should look like?” Children used the language with which they were most comfortable when they provided responses, such as:

“You should stay with your partner.”

“*Tienen que trabajar juntos.*” (They need to work together).

As children spoke, she wrote their responses on chart paper. Mrs. Benavides also suggested they should look at their partner when talking to them and share their materials—effective features of cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1994).

Mrs. Benavides engaged in a think-pair-share strategy where she asked children to *think* about what working with a partner should sound like and then to *pair* and *share* with their partner about their response. She regrouped the students as a whole group and asked them again, “What should working with a partner sound like?” Children’s overwhelming response was, “Talking, you should be talking!” Mrs. Benavides extended that idea, “Yes, you should be talking, but you should also be listening to what your partner is saying, right?” Children nodded their heads in agreement. Together, Mrs. Benavides and students established that working with a partner should sound like “saying nice things to your partner,” “saying please and thank you,” and “listening.” The creation of the anchor chart allowed Mrs. Benavides to discover children’s ideas as they constructed their own understandings of the paired learning strategy.

One particular morning, students were sitting on the carpet as Mrs. Benavides was teaching her morning lesson. They had been learning about shapes and sizes; today’s shape was a rhombus. Following her lesson, Mrs. Benavides instructed students to go with their partners and

draw three rhombuses of different sizes. She gave them one sheet of blank paper per pair, as required for this strategy, and asked them to draw the three sizes and write the word rhombus on their paper. Students quickly moved to their tables and began drawing.

Mrs. Benavides noticed that many children were completing the task but individually. She called the children back to the carpet.

Mrs. B: Boys and girls, everyone come to the carpet. You need to be working with your partner. Where is your partner?

Mrs. B: Ms. Christie, you are my partner.

Mrs. B: Ms. C and I are partners. We got a sheet of paper just like you did, okay?

Ms. C, what color do you want?

Ms. C: Red

Mrs. B: Here Ms. C

Ms. C: Thank you

Mrs. B: Okay we are going to do a rhombus, big, middle, and small.

Ms. C: Let's work togeeether. [emphasizing partner work for the children]

Mrs. B: Yes, so do you wanna draw the rhombus?

Ms. C: Yes, I'll go first

Mrs. B: You draw it, and I'll color it. We can take turns.

Students sat quietly, patiently waiting to see what they were going to draw. Once done, Mrs. Benavides turned to her class and said:

Mrs. B: What do you all think?

Students: YES we like it! They all screamed with a few even clapping with joy and excitement.

Mrs. B: We worked in partners; we shared our work just like we said we would on the chart over there. Do you think you can do that with your partner?

Young girl: Yes we can! [She jumped in the air with one hand raised.]

Mrs. B: Okay you're gonna start again.

Mrs. Benavides modeled what she expected students to do while also providing the language they were to be using such as, "Now it's your turn," or "You draw it, and I'll color it."

After the demonstration, students returned to their tables to complete the task. Once students were done, they showed Mrs. Benavides their work. She emphatically said, “That’s excellent partner work. You shared the materials and did it together. I knew you could do it!” She turned the researcher, and excitedly said, “It worked! I can’t believe it took me so long to try that!” This reflection was a pivotal transition for Mrs. Benavides, who began to scaffold children’s learning by modeling her expectations and the steps it would take to complete a task on a regular basis.

Indeed, she used more modeling as the semester continued but also extended the modeling to include other children in the class. Continued observations revealed that Mrs. Benavides would routinely assemble her children on the carpet and ask them to watch as she presented a new center activity. For example, when introducing a matching picture card to words game, she slowly took cards out of a baggie and placed them in front of her. She showed children how to complete the activity as she talked them through it.

Mrs. B: “When you shuffle the cards don’t do it very fast. Take it easy and go slowly” [After her initial demonstration, she asked Marco (a Spanish dominant child) and Sandra (an English dominant child) to come show her how they were to ‘play’ with the materials.]

Mrs B: “Who is going to take out the materials?” Marco pointed to Sandra. “Good, Marco, you are letting your partner go first, but take turns taking the materials out and putting them away.”

Next, she asked Marco to shuffle the cards and for Sandra to help him. As Sandra was shuffling, Marco said, “*despacito*” [go slowly] using his teacher’s language. Mrs. Benavides walked them through the process of taking turns while playing the game. She focused on the turn-taking and the language use.

Mrs. B: “When you pick up a card, read it and ask your partner to find the matching picture. Try it Marco, pick a card and read the word on the card.”

Marco picked a card and read, “*elefante*” (elephant)

Mrs. B: “Now ask Sandra to find the matching picture.”

Marco: “*¿Dónde está?*” (Where is it?) He showed her the picture card. Sandra searched through the cards until she found the picture of an elephant.

Mrs. B: “What is it, Sandra?”

Sandra: “An elephant.”

Mrs. B: “Is she right, Marco?” Marco nodded. “Yes, she is right, so place it next to Marco’s card.”

These instructions prompted students to engage with their partner and encouraged the use of more language within the interaction. During our final interview, Mrs. Benavides expressed her delight with the strategy:

Well, it took me a while to figure it out, but once I did, the kids just got it! They really enjoy working with their partner. It has been wonderful to see them work together—no, learn together because they really are learning from each other. Now kids are talking more, in English and Spanish, and even though I have to get on them about the noise level, they really are engaged.

Mrs. Benavides’ reflection reveals her understanding that children are learning content and language from each other when given the opportunity to engage with a partner. These opportunities create a natural ZPD for children (Vygotsky, 1978).

### **Strategic Pairing of Students**

Initially, Mrs. Benavides heterogeneously paired children based on their language dominance, as determined by the Home Language Survey. Thus, to enhance language development within a ZPD, students were partnered with a student whose language skills were slightly above their level to create opportunities for children to learn language and concepts from each other (Alanís, 2011; Bedrova & Leong, 2015). By the end of September, however, Mrs. Benavides had administered the Woodcock Muñoz Language Survey (Woodcock & Muñoz-Sandoval, 1993) to all students to determine language skills in English and Spanish. She used these scores to reassess her pairings. She paired students using a high/medium or medium/low criteria. For example, children who scored as intermediate Spanish speakers were partnered with children who were in the process of learning Spanish or beginners. This criterion allows children to work within their ZPD because one partner’s level was slightly above the other. However, Mrs. Benavides understood that formal language assessments do not always capture what bilingual children can do in both of their languages (Gottlieb, 2006). When interviewed, she explained the following:

Even though Alicia scored low in both English and Spanish, she knows a lot more than you think. She's very quiet, but I have heard her speaking to Diego in centers. Right now, she understands more than she can say, but she is picking up Spanish very quickly. If you talk to her in Spanish, she understands you. I have her as the English model with Diego who is very strong in his Spanish.

As a result, she continued to use teacher observations and student work samples to monitor children's development and learning. She used this information to guide decision-making related to her pairings.

Like many early childhood teachers, Mrs. Benavides used learning centers throughout her day where children were free to choose activities of interest. Sara and Alex were at the science center one day. According to Mrs. Benavides, Alex, a strong Spanish-speaker was partnered with Sara because of Sara's verbal ability in English. Both students were looking at one large picture book of various animals. Alex was turning the pages of the book, and Sara was holding a magnifying glass so that both could see the details of the animals. Both commented about the pictures.

Sara: Look! It is the baby of the dinosaur.

Alex: Yeah, *el bebé del triceratops*. (Yeah, the baby of the triceratops.)

They quickly got to the end of the book; both closed it up. Sara promptly handed the magnifying glass to Alex and said, "Here, it's your turn," while she returned the picture book to the shelf. As they both walked over to the art center, they used the magnifying glass to look at different boxes of crayons, markers, and paint cartons that were stored on the lower shelves. Each time, Sara described what they were seeing or asked questions about the materials; again, Alex listened and added contributions using his Spanish skills.

Mrs. Benavides used regular and ongoing assessment of children's interactions to determine children's progress in language and concept development but also to determine the effectiveness of the pairing. Mrs. Benavides stated:

Sara is the perfect partner for Alex because she talks a lot and is very patient with him. I have noticed sometimes she even waits for him to repeat what she is saying. I didn't teach them—she just did it on her own. But, Sara is learning Spanish from Alex too. The dinosaurs for example, Alex knows a lot about them and is teaching all of us!

Sara and Alex are ideal partners because they both need interactive spaces in which each can continue to grow linguistically. Because Mrs. Benavides knows her students, she can adjust pairing and instructions that match their zone of proximal development.

In another area of the classroom, Madison, Adrian, Jacob, and Sylvia were one day playing in the dramatic play area. According to Mrs. Benavides, Adrian and Sylvia were developing their English skills while Jacob was strong in both English and Spanish. Madison was developing her Spanish skills. As children engaged in the different centers, Jacob took Sylvia's hand and said, "Vente partner" (*Come on, partner*). They walked together to join Madison and Adrian who were already at the dramatic play area.

Jacob: Let's play family.

Madison: Who is going to be the dad?

Jacob: I'm going to be the mom!

Madison: No no no, you're going to be the brother (as she points to Jacob), you're going to be the dad (pointing to Adrian), I'm going to be the mom, and you're going to be the big sister (pointing to Mariam).

Sylvia: Ok [she smiled enthusiastically]

Jacob: No, I want to be the mom.

Madison: No, you are not a girl.

Jacob: Ok, I am the dad. [Jacob was clearly disappointed with this arrangement but complied with Madison.]

While Sylvia stood at the kitchenette pretending to make food with playdoh, Adrian was tending to a stuffed animal pretending to change its diaper. Jacob got out four pie pans and sat them all out on the table as if dinner was about to be served. He called out, "*Adrian, ven, vamos a comer.*" (Adrian, come on let's eat.) Adrian rushed over to the table. Children collaborated and helped each other in roles that were comfortable for them. Some children like Madison, planned and directed, while others simply played along.

Mrs. Benavides reflected on the heterogeneous nature of the pairs, "Children like Jacob, [who can speak both languages], are so helpful. I mean, they really help their friends but they help me too. I move him around based on who I need him to work with." Indeed, Jacob's ability to navigate both languages played a key role in this arrangement as he engaged all three children in the dramatic play activity.

## Intentional Paired Learning Activities

Students spent much of their mornings working in learning centers. One particular visit, students were working on math center activities centered on pattern understanding. For many young learners, sorting is a precursor for more abstract pattern understanding (Rittle-Johnson et al., 2013). Here, Mrs. Benavides offers a number of noteworthy strategies. She provided a bucket of objects so that children could practice their sorting skills as they progressed to more challenging pattern formations. She asked students to share the materials and observe their partner as they sorted the objects to see if they could determine what attribute they were using. Mrs. Benavides explained:

Josue needed experiences to build his awareness of sorting objects. His only sorting attribute was by color, but at some point, he noticed the ways in which his partner, Patricia, was categorizing the objects by size and shape. He began to imitate what she was doing.

Although Mrs. Benavides did not explicitly tell Josue how he could sort, his observations of Patricia's examples were enough for him to augment his sorting techniques. Because Patricia was stronger in her sorting ability, she was able to model the skill for Josue. Eventually, his sorting categories included size and shape.

Engaging in the task of multiple sorts with Patricia helped Josue think about categories and attributes of objects in multiple ways. Mrs. Benavides continued, "Over time, Josue has learned more and is creating his own categories and then asking Patricia to guess the attributes he used for sorting." This task required pairs to use math vocabulary to justify their thinking as well as engagement with each other. Mrs. Benavides' observation that Josue was developing his math skills through partner work led her to extend the activities at the math center to focus on more abstract pattern understanding.

In another area of the classroom, two children were engaged in drawing AB patterns with shapes when Diego said, "¡Mira, Alicia! Diamante, círculo, diamante, círculo, triángulo....¡No! ¡Diamante, círculo, diamante!" (Look Alicia, diamond, circle, diamond, circle, triangle...no, diamond, circle, diamond!). Diego adjusted his work to accommodate for the error. Showing Alicia his work provided a visual for him to see and adjust his thinking immediately. Allowing children to engage in interactive activities that required a shared level of understanding led to the ability for children to catch errors as they explained their thinking to their partner, which led to



an effective cycle of trial and error in their internalization of the learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

### **Discussion**

Given the influx of dual language programs in the U.S., it is important for early childhood teachers to develop strong pedagogical practices that will accommodate bilingual children's needs as they develop bilingualism and biliteracy. Vygotsky's work reveals how successful learning relies on the active exchange of ideas through language as children engage with each other through observation and imitation (Garton, Harvey, & Pratt, 2003). These interactions can be adapted to meet the needs of children in a variety of classrooms and in a variety of languages.

The purpose of this research study was to examine how one preschool dual language teacher's daily pedagogical practice enhances partner-based learning for effective participation and learning. This study reveals the need for careful attention and planning by the teacher. This planning requires the teacher to focus on the children's level of language, engage in continuous assessment, and develop paired learning activities that promote language and interaction (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2008). Pairing children heterogeneously based on language and cognitive ability creates a natural ZPD for children. This ZPD, however, is not static but dynamically adjusted during interactions with more knowledgeable peers while engaged in a learning task (Bedrova & Leong, 2015).

Paired learning is effective if students understand what to do and how to manage themselves within their pairings (Alanís, 2013). Effective teachers create the routines and expectations for interactive learning (Battistich & Watson, 2003; Dillenbourg, 2002). Mrs. Benavides adjusted her scaffolding through modeling and opportunities for practice. In this way, children had a clear understanding of what she expected of them. The significance of teacher modeling cannot be overstated. As teachers model, they demonstrate how to engage with a partner and encourage the use of language within the interaction. Mrs. Benavides established a consistent routine of modeling her expectations, children were able to follow her demonstrations and apply them to their own partner-based learning. It is imperative for teachers to model how children will take turns and the language they should be using with one another such as, "What do you think?" or "Now it's your turn." As children develop these skills, their learning takes on a deeper level of understanding and increases their cognition and language development. This co-

construction of knowledge sends powerful messages to children—they have the power to help themselves and others.

The concept of partner-based learning relies on the shared construction of knowledge through listening and thinking (Bedrova & Leong, 2015). Like teacher modeling, the sharing of materials is an essential component in collaborative learning. In an early childhood classroom, this can be as simple as reading a big book together at a literacy center or creating AB patterns in a math center. The act of taking turns, listening to each other, and thinking about the other's words during their big book reading on dinosaurs, for example, helped Alex and Sara develop their linguistic and academic skills in a space that was comfortable and meaningful for them. These intentional configurations allow children to display their knowledge in ways that reveal their competence as learners and language users.

When teachers design instruction that includes opportunities to talk, they place children in positions where they are both recipients and producers of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Mrs. Benavides enhanced the academic interactions when children worked on a unified task that required sharing of materials. One set of manipulatives encouraged each child to contribute to the process as they completed the task together. Requiring children to share materials with their partners created opportunities for children to learn from each other and gain an awareness of what they know and what they do not know (Rittle-Johnson, Saylor, & Swygert, 2007).

In this classroom, children were developing their biliteracy skills within what Krashen (1987) termed the silent period, where bilingual children silently listen as they process the target language before they begin to use it with confidence. When Mrs. Benavides created a dramatic play area, she facilitated interaction with peers. Creating an environment where children can share similar interests or experiences leads to learning. Even though Adrian and Sylvia did not engage in the discussions, they were listening and engaging with their classmates in roles that were easy for them to follow.

Finally, authentic assessment, such as observation, yields information that is useful in planning instruction. When teachers use this data to improve planning and systematic support, it leads to meaningful learning experiences for young children. For Mrs. Benavides, assessment on children's performance and progress was an ongoing cycle that included the collection of multiple forms of data, interpretation, reflection, and decision-making. Effective early childhood teachers develop these skills of observation across contexts and over time and use continual reflection on

their use of the data cycle and authentic assessment to improve teaching and learning (McAfee, Leong, & Bodrova, 2016). Mrs. Benavides used this data to determine children's ZPD and develop paired learning activities that extended bilingual children's thinking and language production.

### **Conclusion**

Early childhood teachers can provide assistance, guidance, and direction through scaffolding children's social construction of knowledge. In this case, paired learning provided opportunities for sharing ideas and practicing oral language skills in nonthreatening environments. This pedagogical practice recognizes that learning is enhanced when it happens in contexts that are socio-culturally and linguistically meaningful for the learner (Garcia & Garcia, 2012; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003).

This work supports the need for dual language teachers to develop activities and structures that lead to successful interactions in the early childhood classroom. Effective early childhood teachers enrich emergent bilingual children's experiences by scaffolding paired learning opportunities within learning centers, dramatic play areas, and intentional partner-based activities. The rich sociocultural spaces where children use their full cultural and linguistic repertoires are significant for biliteracy development (Martinez-Alvarez et al., 2017). When teachers intentionally create these collaborative spaces, they acknowledge the active role that students play in the learning process and that all children have significant contributions to make in their learning process.

## References

- Altermatt, E. R., Pomerantz, E. M., Ruble, D. N., Frey, K. S., & Greulich, F. K. (2002). Predicting changes in children's self-perceptions of academic competence: A naturalistic examination of evaluative discourse among classmates. *Developmental Psychology, 38*(6), 903-17.
- Alanís, I. (2013). Where's my partner? Developing effective bilingual pairs for dual language classrooms. *Young Children 68*(1), 42-47.
- Alanís, I. (2011). Learning from each other: Examining the use of bilingual pairs in dual language classrooms. *Dimensions of Early Childhood, 39*(1), 21-28.
- Alanís, I. (2015). Developing paired learning in dual language classrooms. *Early Years, 24*-26.
- Alanís, I., & Arreguin-Anderson, M. G. (2017). Supporting young children in partner-based interactions. *Early Years Journal, 23*-25.
- Baquedano-López, P., Mangual Figueroa, A., & Hernández, S. J. (2011). An integrated approach to the study of transitions as learning activity: Two cases from Spanish immersion classrooms. In P. R. Portes & S. Salas (Eds.), *Vygotsky al sabor Latino: Cultural historical theory, research, and praxis for and with US Latinos and other non-dominant communities* (pp. 180-198). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Battistich, V., & Watson, M. (2003). Fostering social development in preschool and the early elementary grades through co-operative classroom activities. In R. M. Gillies & A. F. Ashman (Eds.), *Co-operative learning: The social and intellectual outcomes of learning in groups*. New York, NY: Routledge Falmer
- Bergman, D., & Morpew, J. (2014). Comparing classroom interactive behaviors of science and nonscience preservice teachers. *Journal of Classroom Interaction, 49*(2), 4-10.
- Bedrova, E., & Leong, D. J. (2015). Vygotskian and post-Vygotskian views on children's play. *American Journal of Play, 7*(3), 371-387.
- Citi-data.com. (2013). Retrieved from <http://www.city-data.com/zip/78201.html>
- Cole, M. (2013). Rompiendo el silencio: Meta-analysis of effectiveness of peer-mediated learning at improving language outcomes for ELLs. *Bilingual Research Journal, 36*, 146–166. doi:10.1080/15235882.2013.814609
- Collier, V., & Thomas, W. (2009). *Educating English language learners for a transformed world. Dual language education of New Mexico*. Albuquerque, NM: Fuente Press.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2007). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- De Lisi, R., & Goldbeck, S. L. (1999). Implication of Piagetian theory for peer learning. In A. M. O'Donnell & A. King (Eds.), *Cognitive perspectives on peer learning* (pp. 3-37). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Dickinson, D. K., & Neuman, S. B. (2006). Cognitive and linguistic building blocks of early literacy. In S. B. Neuman & D. K. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of early literacy research* (Vol. 2). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

- Dillenbourg, P. (2002). Over-scripting CSCL: The risks of blending collaborative learning with instructional design. In P. A. Kirschner (Ed.), *Three worlds of CSCL. Can we support CSCL?* (pp. 61–91). Heerlen: Open Universiteit Nederland.
- Donato, R. (2004). Aspects of collaboration in pedagogical discourse. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 24, 284-302.
- Fawcett, L. M., & Garton, A. F. (2005). The effect of collaboration on children's problem-solving ability. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 75, 157-169.
- Freeman, N. K., & Somerindyke, J. (2001). Social play at the computer: Preschoolers scaffold and support peers' computer competence. *Information Technology in Childhood Education Annual*, 1, 203–13.
- Garcia, E. E., & Garcia, E. H. (2012). *Understanding the language development and early education of Hispanic children*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- García, O., & Kleifgen, J. A. (2010). *Educating emergent bilinguals: Policies, programs, and practices for English language learners* (Language and Literacy Series). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- García, O., & Sylvan, C. E. (2011). Pedagogies and practices in multilingual classrooms: Singularities in pluralities. *The Modern Language Journal*, 95, 385-400.
- Garton, A. F. & Pratt, C. (2001). Peer assistance in children's problem solving. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 19, 307-318.
- Gerde, H. K., Bingham, G. E., & Wasik, B. A. (2012). Writing in early childhood classrooms: Guidance for best practices. *Early Childhood Education Journal* 40(6), 351-359.
- Gersten R., & Baker, S. (2000). What we know about effective instructional practices for English language learners. *Exceptional Children*, 66, 454–470. doi:10.1177/001440290006600402
- Gjems, L. (2013). Teaching in ECE: Promoting children's language learning and cooperation on knowledge construction in everyday conversations in kindergarten. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 29, 39-45.
- Gomez, L., Freeman, D., & Freeman, Y. (2005). Dual language education: A promising 50–50 model. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 29(1), 145–163.
- Gormley, W., & Gayer, T. (2005). Promoting school readiness in Oklahoma: An evaluation of Tulsa's pre-k program. *Journal of Human Resources*, 533–558.
- Gottlieb, M. (2006). *Assessing English language learners: Bridges from language proficiency to academic achievement*. Thousand Oaks, CA Jossey-Bass.
- Griffin, M. L. (2002). Why don't you use your finger? Paired reading in first grade. *The Reading Teacher*, 55(8), 766–774.
- Gutiérrez, K. D., & Rogoff, B. (2003). Cultural ways of learning: Individual traits or repertoires of practice. *Educational Researcher*, 32(5), 19-25.
- Gutiérrez, K., Zepeda, M., & Castro, D. C. (2010). Advancing early literacy learning for all children: Implications of the NELP report for dual language learners. *Educational Researcher*, 39(4), 334-339.

- Horner, S. L., Battacharayya, S. & O'Connor, E. A. (2008). Modeling: It's more than just imitation. *Childhood Education*, 84(4), 219-222.
- Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1994). *Learning together and alone: Cooperative, competitive and individualistic learning* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allen & Bacon.
- Krashen, S. D. (1987). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall International.
- Lee, O., & Buxton, C. A. (2013). Teacher professional development to improve science and literacy achievement of English language learners. *Theory into Practice*, 52(2), 110-117.
- Madrid, L., Canas, M., & Ortega-Medina, M. (2007). Effects of team competition versus team cooperation in classwide peer tutoring. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 100(3), 155-160. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.libweb.lib.utsa.edu/stable/27548174>
- Martínez, R. A. (2010). Spanglish as literacy tool: Toward an understanding of the potential role of Spanish English code-switching in the development of academic literacy. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 45, 124-149.
- Martinez-Alvarez, P., Cuevas, I., & Torres-Guzmán, M. (2017). Preparing bilingual teachers: Mediating belonging with multimodal explorations of language, identity, and culture. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 68(2), 155-178.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2009). Learning to read and write: Developmentally appropriate practices for young children. *National Association for the Education of Young Children*, 53(4), 30-46.
- National Institute for Early Education Research. (2016). State of preschool: 2015. Rutgers, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research. Retrieved from: [http://nieer.org/wpcontent/uploads/2016/05/2015\\_DLL\\_and\\_Workforce\\_rev1.pdf](http://nieer.org/wpcontent/uploads/2016/05/2015_DLL_and_Workforce_rev1.pdf)
- Otto, B. (2014). *Language development in early childhood*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Park, J., & Lee, J. (2015). Dyadic collaboration among preschool-age children and the benefits of working with a more socially advanced peer. *Early Education and Development*, 26(4), 574-593.
- Puzio, K., & Colby, G. T. (2013). Cooperative learning and literacy: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 6, 339-360.  
doi:10.1080/19345747.2013.775683
- Ramani, G. (2012). Influence of a playful, child-directed context on preschool children's peer cooperation. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 58(2), 159-190.
- Rittle-Johnson, B., Fyfe, E., McLean, L., & McEldoon, K. (2013). Emerging understanding of patterning in 4-year-olds. *Journal of Cognition and Development*, 14(3), 376-396.
- Rohrbeck, C. A., Ginsburg-Block, M., Fantuzzo, J. W., & Miller, T. R. (2003). Peer-assisted learning interventions with elementary school students: A meta-analytic review. *Journal*

- of *Educational Psychology*, 95(2), 240-257. Retrieved from <https://login.libweb.lib.utsa.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest.com/libweb.lib.utsa.edu/docview/210962747?accountid=7122>
- Samaha, N. V., & De Lisi, R. (2000). Peer collaboration on a nonverbal reasoning task by urban minority students. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 69(1), 5-14.
- Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Manni, L. (2008). Would you like to tidy up now? An analysis of adult questioning in the English foundation stage. *Early Years*, 28(1), 5e22.
- Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Sylva, K. (2004). Researching pedagogy in English pre-schools. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(5), 713-730.
- Swain, M. (2001). Integrating language and content: Teaching through collaborative tasks. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 58(1), 44-63.
- Tarim, K. (2009). The effects of cooperative learning on preschoolers' mathematics problem-solving ability. *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, 72(3), 325-340.
- Vasileiadou, M. (2009). Cooperative learning and its effects on pre-primary, marginalized children. *Emotional & Behavioural Difficulties*, 14(4), 337-347. doi:10.1080/13632750903303179.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind and society: The development of higher mental processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Woodcock, R. W., & Muñoz-Sandoval, A. F. (1993). *Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey comprehensive manual*. Chicago, IL: Riverside.
- Zimmerman, B. J. & Schunck, D. H. (2003). Albert Bandura: The scholar and his contributions to educational psychology. In B. J. Zimmerman & D. H. Schunck (Eds.), *Educational psychology: A century of contributions* (pp. 431-458). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Ziv, M., Solomon, A., & Frye, D. (2008). Young children's recognition of the intentionality of teaching. *Child Development*, 79(5), 1237-1256.