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Understanding the language development and early education of Hispanic children (2012).

Eugene E. García & Erminda H. García. Teachers College Press

Reviewed by: Norbert Francis

Language development in early childhood, in addition to assuring a uniform platform of grammatical competence in our mother tongue, lays down a foundation for advanced language abilities tied to literacy and schooling. With this idea in mind, García and García survey the research and present a pedagogical model for narrowing the academic achievement gap that separates many children of Hispanic heritage from the mainstream school population. The distinctive merit of their approach resides in organizing this presentation around a scientific understanding of how children learn. The method for presenting arguments and proposals takes empirical findings of research as its starting point – not a guarantee that they are all correct, but such a method provides us with a way to objectively evaluate them. Chapter 1 clarifies that actually it is the large sub-category, a subset of all Hispanic children, at risk of school failure that is the subject of the book. This is important because two chapters (2 and 7) are devoted to an extensive discussion of cultural factors. Here, readers in search of general cultural traits of “Hispanic culture” that might influence cognition and learning in a fundamental way will come away disappointed. But if they go back and read carefully, they will find some still much needed clarity on this point: that in fact there are no such broadly generalizable cultural traits that affect intellectual and linguistic development in this way. Poorly designed early studies had speculated along the lines of distinctive, culturally determined, learning styles, for example. The authors do us all a favor by omitting discussion of what are now old theories of purely historical interest regarding this speculation. The relevant concept here is the contrast between the “group-oriented notion of culture” and the more fine-grained “individual oriented conception of culture” (pp. 30–33), the latter allowing us to avoid the error of the “Hispanic box” (p. 32).

It is in the realm of teaching practice and educational policy (Chapters 3–6 and 8) where the most interesting recommendations are presented, in part because a number of them question recently fashionable theories in multicultural education. The biggest first mistake that schools make is to not appreciate and systematically exploit the vast fund of linguistic and conceptual knowledge that preschool children arrive to school with, compounded by the English-only restrictions on teaching that have gained in popularity since Proposition 227 in California. The authors are clear on this point: where

educators must set their sights is on the systematic promotion of children's preschool potential through an explicit focus on learning outcomes that support academic proficiency in the all-important literacy-related language learning objectives. For second language (L2) learners, a strong English language teaching program, from the very beginning, is an integral part of this model. Central to an early start on building up the advanced literacy-related language proficiencies is direct instruction on decoding skills for reading, starting with phonological awareness and the alphabetic principle. Teachers should take note of the examples of how phonics instruction, even for the young child, can be enriched with motivating and highly context-embedded activities (77–85). This new awareness of how patterns of letters represent language allows children to call upon their fund of linguistic and conceptual knowledge – for English Language Learners, also acquired via their first language (L1) – to begin right away to compose texts (pp. 87–94).

The jury is still out on whether instruction in phonological awareness (PA) is most productive prior to or integrated with initial literacy instruction – the question of *prerequisite for* or *necessary correlate of* – see Castles and Coltheart (2004) and Verhoeven et al. (2011) for discussion. Notwithstanding the resolution of this research problem, activities that promote PA in preschool, such as poetry, rhyming games, and phoneme manipulation (pp. 78–79) probably contribute to developing the foundations of the alphabetic principle. Nevertheless, the growing consensus in the scientific research on reading and writing is clearly leaning toward the conclusion that PA is an indispensable component of skilled decoding and proficiency reading ability overall, a conclusion today in direct contradiction to one-time popular philosophies that downplayed this aspect of literacy learning (most notable among them being strong versions of “whole-language”).

The authors place special emphasis in writers workshop activities on the promotion of narrative ability. For example, as a part of the revision and editing process, we can take advantage of young children's pre-school narrative ability to promote focused reflection on discourse-level patterns (metalinguistic awareness at the discourse/text-level) – PA is metalinguistic awareness at the word-level. The culturally specific knowledge of narrative traditions and literacy-related knowledge of story structure that children possess is “transmitted” to school where it can be given recognition, nurtured, and developed further toward higher-order academic comprehension abilities. Educators need to recognize the productivity of utilizing existing narrative discourse ability to jump-start the development of advanced academic language proficiency. Second language learners, while they may be beginners in the L2, possess extensive discourse ability acquired via their L1, now available for use in structuring L2 expressive narrative tasks, a conclusion that

we also arrived at from our study of child bilingualism in Mexico (Francis, 2012). Early story telling and story comprehension ability is increasingly being viewed as an essential underpinning of later school achievement (Spencer and Slocum, 2010). The strength of the prior foundation of these preschool discourse proficiencies varies widely in early childhood. But nothing in children's cultural background or family circumstance stands as a impediment to start with the resources at their disposal on the first day of preschool and continue on the path of developing higher-order academic language abilities. The authors recognize the reality of wide individual differences in this domain, while at the same time giving no credence to imprecise notions of language deficit, purportedly arising from subtractive bilingualism, lack of relevant early experience, etc.

A personal note

Moved by the compelling account in the “What’s in a name” Introduction, the Index lead me to the teaching application of the same idea in Chapter 5 (Name Game, pp. 78–79). Coming to America after World War II with a family name, for English speakers, even more unpronounceable than Marierminda, it all came back. Especially for early childhood teachers, there cannot be any preparation for the first day of class more valuable and productive than practicing how, with the help of a colleague if necessary, to pronounce your students’ names (at least to come close). As a segue into phonological awareness and alphabetic knowledge, the Name Game can get these essential learning objectives off to a strong start. At the same time, this activity highlights one of the great obstacles that teachers face today in the current climate of radical English-only school language policy. The authors mention the potential confusion (between English and Spanish pronunciation) occasioned by classifying many Spanish-origin first and last names: Gerardo, Jaime, Llosa, Uribarri, Ximena, Yesenia, Zoraida, to mention just a few. By my count there are seven possible initial letter-phoneme correspondences that differ significantly, seven that are close but differ noticeably, and at least one that English doesn’t have. In states with restrictive school language policies, teachers might think that playing the Name Game bilingually will get them a meeting with the principal (it’s slightly complicated, but in the end less confusing for students, with two separate alphabet charts). This dilemma could be one of the topics of an expanded Chapter 5 in the next edition. It is a true dilemma, because why even go to the trouble of planning a bilingual lesson if Spanish might be excluded from literacy teaching anyway?

References

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