

# Connecting

Right from the Start

Fostering Effective  
Communication with  
Dual Language Learners



Jennifer J. Chen, EdD

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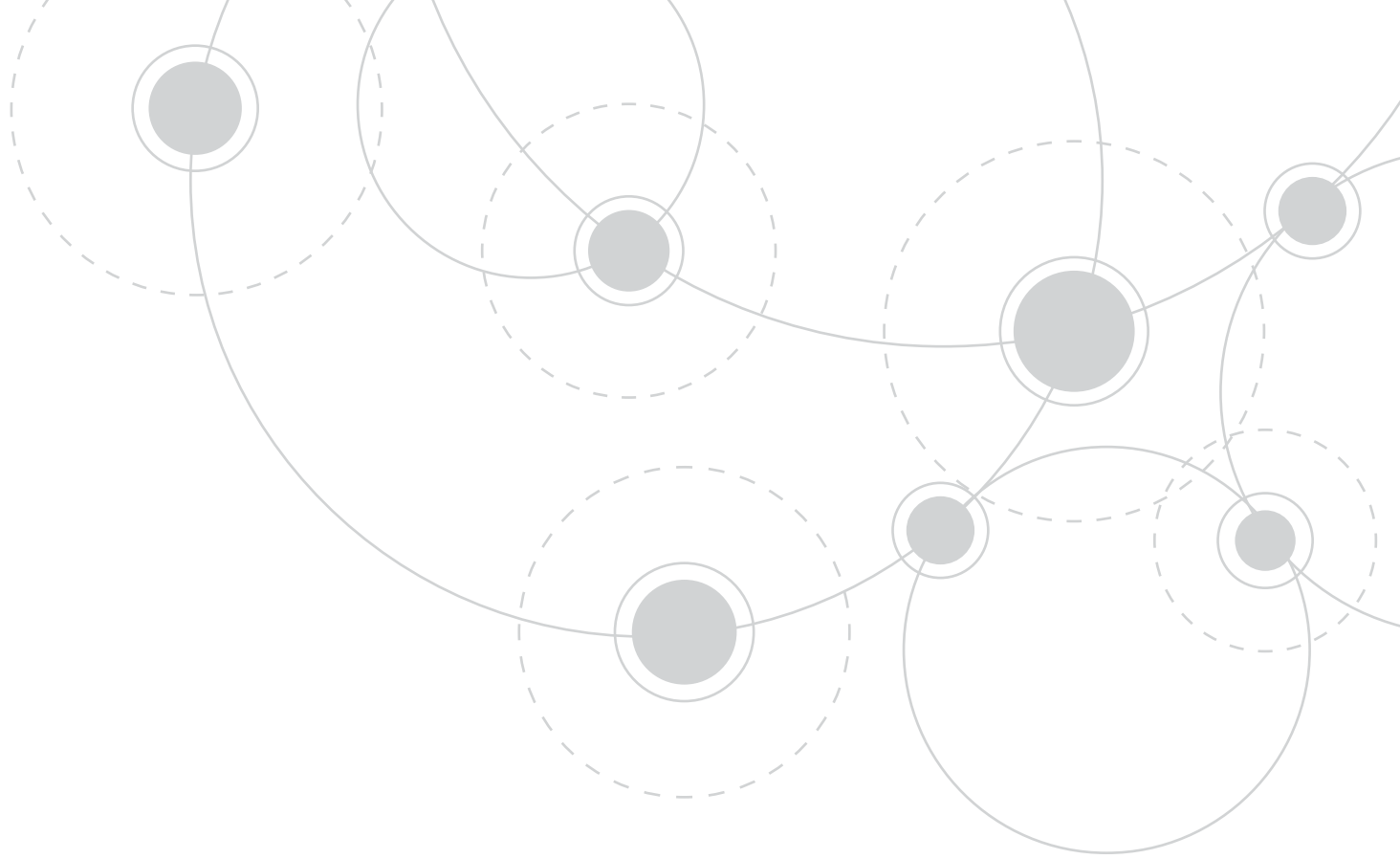
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Communication is at the heart of human experience. My personal and professional experience has been immensely enriched by the intricate art of communication with others:

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- In great admiration of Karen Nemeth whose expertise and extensive publications on dual language learners continue to inspire my own work.
- In fond memory of my beloved grandparents—who were not professional teachers by trade, yet became exemplars of teaching by example.

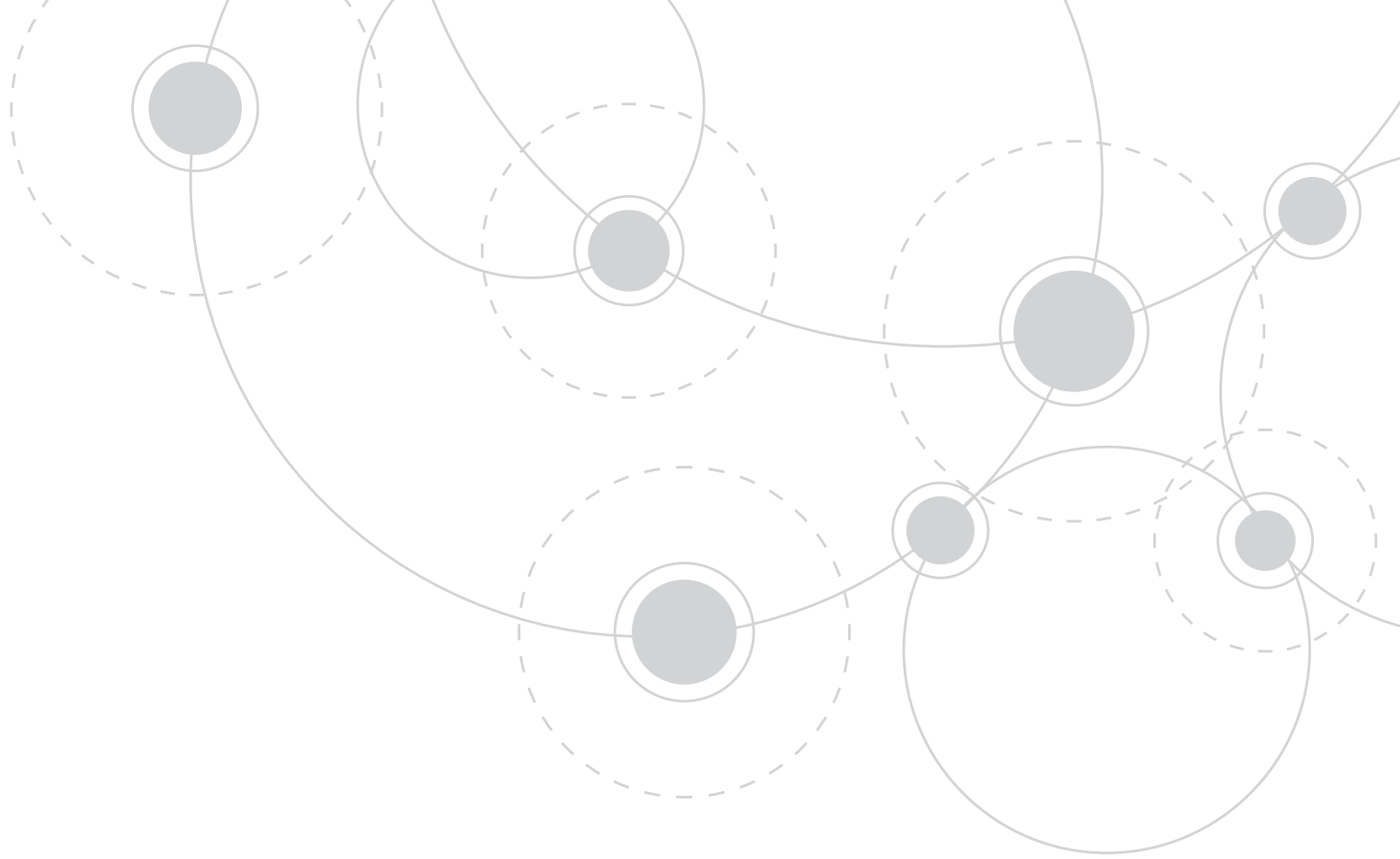
- In deep gratitude to my parents who are my first teachers—for giving life to my very existence in this world, guiding me through my early years, and providing me the opportunity to learn a second language in my teenage years.
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# Foreword

When I visited a classroom in New Jersey years ago, a young child came up to me and asked me something tearfully—repeating his message over and over with that trembling lower lip. I felt so sad that I couldn't understand his language. One of the teachers told me he was asking something about his mommy. I will never forget my feeling of helplessness. Throughout my career I have been able to help countless children and teachers, but it's that moment when I could not communicate with a child in need that continues to haunt me.

Communication is a critical component of our human existence. It is amazing that something so simple can be so powerful. It has the power to change lives in grand and small ways every day. We certainly depend on communication to nurture and educate young children. But when language differences cause communication to break down, those vital connections between teachers and children can be lost.

It seems fitting that communication is the focus of this wonderful new resource for early childhood educators. As classrooms across the country are becoming more diverse, every teacher and caregiver needs to understand all of the facets of communication and how to



adapt it to meet the needs of young children who speak different languages. Teachers need to find ways to communicate content to children who are dual language learners. They need children to be able to show what they know and can do in different ways. *Connecting Right from the Start* provides research-based strategies that give teachers exactly the tools they need.

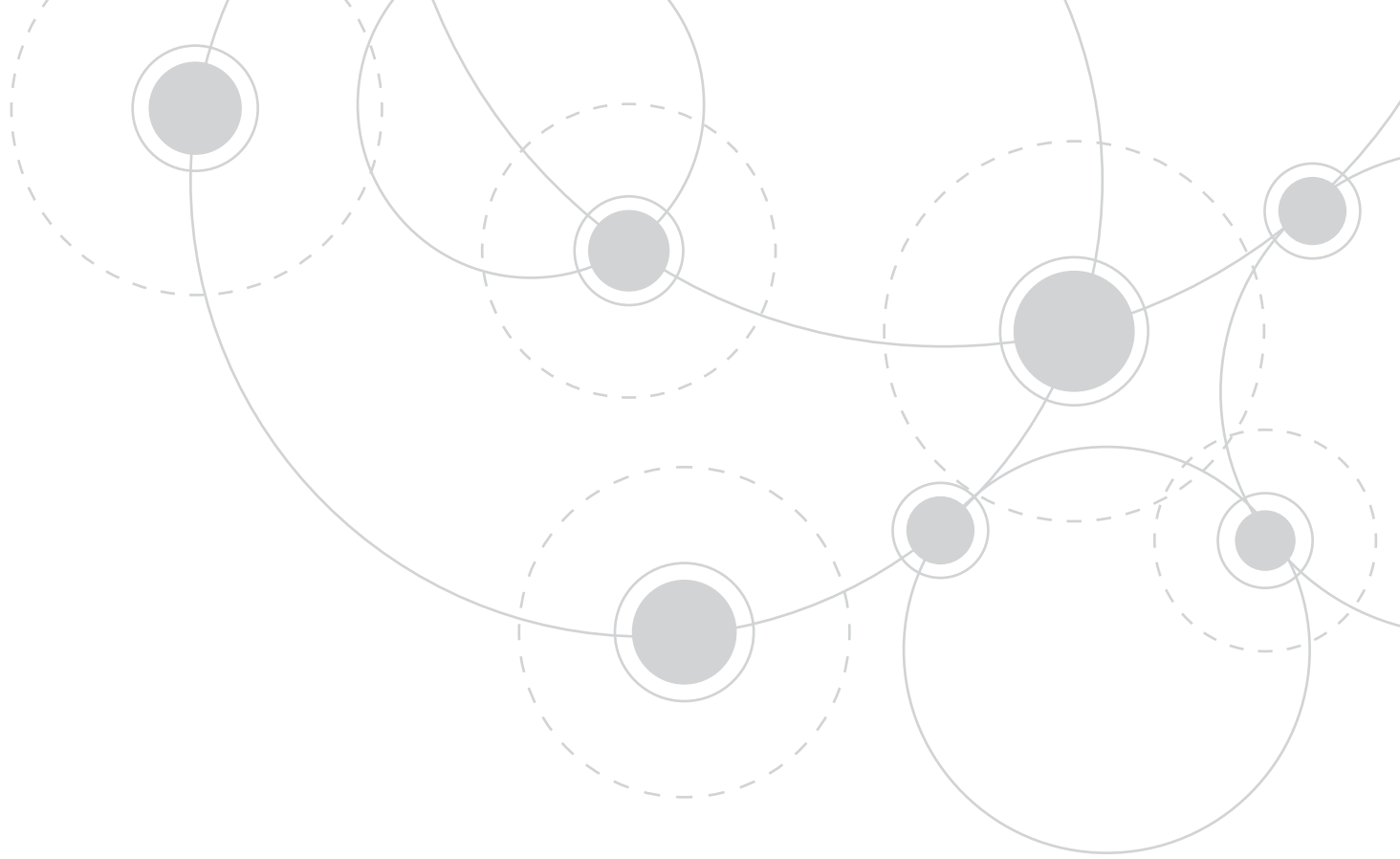
Communication involves so much more than learning a language. The social and cultural aspects of communication are just as important as the academic aspects to the early learning process, especially in linguistically diverse groups of children. *Connecting Right from the Start* gives the reader a comprehensive background that integrates all of the important facets of communication including the roles of the family, digital media, and assessments for DLLs.

*Connecting Right from the Start* is a much-needed guide that takes a unique and valuable approach to describing how second language develops in the context of communication. Readers will appreciate how clearly the author makes the connection between theory and practice, emphasizing important experts such as Howard Gardner and Lev Vygotsky. What truly sets this book apart is the impressive array of vignettes and examples that build a deeper understanding of what really happens when diverse peers and teachers learn to communicate. In stories such as the one about Amelia, José, and Jaden, we learn how valuable peer interactions are to DLLs and how the teacher can play a role in supporting them. Readers will find they are better able to articulate how theory and research inform their teaching practice with young dual language learners, and they will gain a wealth of practical strategies they can use right away.

I am honored to join with Dr. Chen in reminding early childhood educators that young dual language learners are the fastest growing segment of our population. We simply must keep pace with the changing population because we cannot afford to leave even one child behind. Teachers must keep moving forward and learning more and improving practices. This book is just the right tool to inform and support early childhood educators for their work today and for the classrooms of the future.

—Karen N. Nemeth

Author of *Many Languages, One Classroom: Teaching Dual and English Language Learners* and *Many Languages, Building Connections: Supporting Infants and Toddlers Who Are Dual Language Learners*



# Introduction

*Learning and teaching should not stand on opposite banks and just watch the river flow by; instead, they should embark together on a journey down the water. Through an active, reciprocal exchange, teaching can strengthen learning and how to learn.*

—Loris Malaguzzi, Italian early childhood educator,  
quoted in *The Hundred Languages of Children:  
The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education*

Malaguzzi reminded us that learning and teaching go hand in hand. Viewing from the lens that teachers are not just leaders but are also learners of knowledge, it is conceivable that when the teacher engages in the dual, reciprocal act of learning and teaching, such work will not only enhance his own learning, but also his own teaching effectiveness. One area that teachers must learn is how to support student learning by respecting and incorporating the diverse strengths and needs of children, a teaching-learning process that is more important than ever in the face of intensified diversity in the United States and in the increasingly globalizing world.

Today's teachers are called to be adept at addressing the diverse needs of their learners. Child care center-based programs, preschools, and schools are places where young children from all backgrounds congregate to learn together. For young children, early childhood settings have become a sort of playground for them to begin experiencing and exercising their understanding about diversity up close. However, this virtual playground must be physically, developmentally, culturally, and linguistically safe and comfortable with proper guidance from the teacher to facilitate the children's interactions.

The education of and respect for diversity must begin with the teacher, as she is the one who sets the tone for learning in the classroom. First and foremost, the teacher must learn to develop and apply a wide range of educational tools to expand the children's minds and hearts. As children look to the teacher for support, the most crucial tool that a teacher can provide is showing respect for diversity and treating children as worthy, capable human beings with unique potential by recognizing their intellectual strengths and needs, as well as cultural and linguistic characteristics.

Consider the following not-uncommon classroom scenario.

*On the first day of school, a teacher welcomes twenty children from a variety of backgrounds into her classroom:*

- Mirabella (just arrived to the United States from Ecuador a month ago) speaks fluent Spanish at home but knows no English.
- Chu Ming (immigrated to the United States with his family from China a year ago) speaks Mandarin Chinese at home but communicates in English with some difficulty.
- Angie (a Vietnamese-born American) speaks both Vietnamese and English fluently.
- Lily (a Chinese-born American) and Joshua (an American-born Indian) have been identified as gifted and talented, with advanced linguistic competence.

- Hannah (adopted from Korea when she was only a few months old by an ethnically mixed Korean and Caucasian family) speaks some Korean but prefers to use English.
- Mira (from Mexico) and Marco (from Portugal) are identified as having language delays and require special education services.
- Lila (possessing a strong spatial intelligence) benefits from instruction that encourages the use of visual and spatial cues, such as pictures, graphs, semantic webs, and storyboards.
- Dan (possessing a strong bodily-kinesthetic intelligence) communicates effectively with others using movement with his body, such as dancing and engaging in dramatic play.
- The rest of the children come from other ethnic, cultural, linguistic, intellectual, and socioeconomic backgrounds and exhibit a variety of their own unique learning strengths and needs.

Increasingly, in a typical inclusive early childhood classroom, it is not unusual to find a group of children with diverse characteristics similar to those just described in the classroom



scenario. Karen Nemeth's book *Many Languages, One Classroom: Teaching Dual and English Language Learners*, aptly captures the phenomenon of cultural and language diversity in the early childhood classroom and provides effective and creative strategies to support dual and English language learners' learning needs. Contributing to this line of work, this book focuses particularly on connecting theories to practice so teachers can be better positioned to facilitate the acquisition of effective communication skills in dual language learners (DLLs).

Suffice it to say that advancing children's learning and development is at the heart of any well-meaning educational endeavor. However, as classrooms in the United States are becoming increasingly diverse, the goal of education for all children takes on a particular meaning. It means that we must provide a high-quality education that addresses the learning and developmental needs of children from a diversity of cultural, linguistic, intellectual, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Educating the nation's rapidly growing DLL population is as much a challenge as it is an opportunity for enhancing our practices with them. For example, in an early childhood setting, it is incumbent upon the teacher to identify the unique communication needs of these DLLs from which to design and implement intentional and responsive instruction. We need to stock our toolkits with the proper knowledge, skills, and dispositions to enable us to do so effectively. While recognizing this need is an important beginning, what is more critical yet daunting is the doing part. This is where we need to translate knowledge into action. To help make the doing more doable for early childhood practitioners, this book aims to apply theories and research to practice by offering a variety of strategies for facilitating young DLLs' efforts to become competent communicators across different learning contexts. It illustrates pedagogical possibilities that early childhood educators can consider for settings from infant programs to third-grade classrooms. Furthermore, I recognize that young learners are growing up with technology and can be considered *digital natives*, as Marc Prensky noted in an article in the journal *On the Horizon*. Therefore, throughout this book I also have woven in teaching strategies that capitalize on DLLs' digital talents and interests as well as the vast resources that technology can offer.

## Teaching for Successful Communication

In an effort to promote educational excellence, this book addresses some of the most pressing and frequent questions that many early childhood educators ask, including, *How can we teach DLLs so that they can succeed? What can I do to help DLLs learn to communicate effectively?* This book is designed to serve as an essential resource for early childhood educators by

offering practical suggestions of developmentally, culturally, and linguistically responsive pedagogical strategies for helping young DLLs acquire effective communication skills.

In this book, I use the term *early childhood educators* generically and broadly to refer to individuals, including directors and administrators, who work directly or indirectly in a range of early childhood settings from child care center, preschool, to public school. I understand that those who work in an infant-toddler program are often referred to as *caregivers* and those in preschool and public school programs as *teachers*. For concise terminology, hereafter I will use *teachers* to refer to all of those working directly with young children in early childhood settings, and *educators* to encompass individuals working indirectly with these young children, including those serving in administrative roles.

More than two decades of research on human brain development and psychology affirms that the early years are critical for children's development and learning. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), every sector of the early childhood education field, including teacher education and professional development programs, is confronted with the challenge of working with a culturally and linguistically diverse population of children and their families. This book endeavors to offer knowledge of how educators can help DLLs acquire effective communication skills in the early childhood years, when development and learning are of critical importance.

Effective communication not only is essential for young children's academic and social competence in the early childhood years, it also sets the foundation for their continued success in school and later in life, especially in the global world where interaction with people from diverse backgrounds is inevitable. During the early childhood years, children acquire the language and other essential tools to effectively communicate their intentions, ideas, and feelings, as well as appropriately respond to those of others. In preschool and the primary grades, according to researchers Carolyn Webster-Stratton and M. Jamila Reid, children who are socially competent tend to academically outperform their peers who are not. Effective communication skills enable children to become socially competent, including building respectful, positive interactions with others and making meaning of the world.

Given the education climate in the United States that demands external accountability and rigorous grade-level expectations for kindergarten through twelfth grade as described in the new Common Core State Standards, educational policymakers and early childhood educators are devoting increased attention to the teaching and learning of young children in preschool to third grade, especially those identified as DLLs. *Dual language learners* are defined by Head Start in *Dual Language Learning: What Does It Take?* as children who are learning at least two languages simultaneously, or learning a second language while simultaneously maintaining their learning of their first or home language. The Office of Head Start employs this term in

a positive light to demonstrate and promote respect for the home language of young children as a linguistic asset, and thus it is a culturally sensitive term. As this book views children's learning and development through the lens of strengths, I will use *DLLs* to refer to young children, except when describing statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau or citing literature where the term *English language learner* (ELL) was originally used.

## Working with DLLs

You may agree that learning to communicate and communicating to learn are daunting tasks. Even English-speaking young children struggle with these tasks. DLLs face a double challenge of learning not only the academics (content, task knowledge, and skills), but also the social imperatives associated with effective communication. This dual task is even more complicated for young DLLs attending school for the first time or making the transition from preschool to formal schooling amidst learning a new culture and language. As early childhood educators, we cannot afford to sit on the sideline when many of the young children are DLLs—including those with special needs and those from low-income families—who are struggling to perform academically and socially. Many early childhood educators have recognized vast differences in DLLs. Head Start and Early Head Start went further in putting knowledge into practice by making it a priority to address the learning needs and abilities of DLLs from low-income backgrounds.

This book was conceived to offer a wide variety of teaching strategies for facilitating effective communication skills in DLLs to enable them to succeed academically and socially now and in the future. It also includes strategies for DLLs with special needs. Like a tiny seed needing the right conditions (soil, water, and sunlight) to bloom into a beautiful flower, a DLL will also benefit from the proper conditions (teacher scaffolding, enriching learning experiences, and culturally and linguistically sensitive instruction) to sprout into a capable, confident, and effective communicator. Like a good gardener who attends to all of his seedlings with care to ensure that they survive and thrive, especially those planted with unfavorable conditions, an effective teacher tailors her instruction and provides extra support to help her DLL seedlings achieve their potential. I hope that the ideas articulated in this book will inspire you to reflect on your own practices and consider ways to adjust, improve, or retool your strategies for working with this child population.

## How You Can Use This Book

This book hinges on the idea that the teacher serves as a facilitator of student learning and the children are active constructors of knowledge. Furthermore, advocating for developmentally, linguistically, and culturally responsive approaches to working with young DLLs, I share a strengths-based perspective in viewing children’s cultural and linguistic knowledge as well as intellectual capacities and potential as assets.

However, this is not a cookbook filled with recipes and step-by-step instructions. It is not prescriptive, but rather descriptive. It is written to provoke thought and reflection, as well as encourage flexibility and creativity in the educator’s practices with diverse DLLs. There is no one-size-fits-all curriculum, pedagogical approach, or instructional strategy. Not even a constellation of approaches or strategies would work for all children at all times, in all circumstances. So any singular strategy or set of strategies that claims to work for all is not realistic. In places where I do use *all* children, I do not mean it in the literal sense of the word, but I imply that strategies can work for every child with appropriate modifications to suit individual learning strengths and needs. With this goal in mind, I encourage you to





view the ideas, classroom examples, and strategies described in this book simply as resources for adoption or adaptation to fit each unique teaching-learning context or as a source of reflection and contemplation on your practice with DLLs particularly in facilitating their communicative development.

The content of this book is appropriate for a wide audience, spanning from novice to veteran educators, especially those working directly or indirectly with the DLL population and those desiring greater knowledge, skills and dispositions concerning teaching this child segment. If you are reading this book, chances are you are one of those early childhood educators who genuinely care about enhancing your practices with young DLLs. You may be a novice early childhood educator, hoping that this book can explain some educational theories that you might have heard of, learned about, or are currently learning, and that it will provide you with practical examples and strategies to follow. You may well be a veteran educator, simply seeking new inspirations. You may not be a novice or veteran educator, but somewhere between the two, seeking to reinforce your teaching effectiveness or improve your current practices. You may be serving as a school administrator, child care director, or policy maker, or acting in another administrative role related to the education of young DLLs in particular, and your goal may be to pass on knowledge to your professional staff. Still yet, you may be a researcher or early childhood teacher educator like me. This book is for all of you! Whatever stage you are at in your professional career, or whatever reasons or motivational forces that drive you to this book, it is encouraging to me that you have decided to read it, and hence open your heart and mind to the possibility of new learning for you. I hope that in this book, you will find what you are looking for or at least be inspired as you continue on the journey toward acquiring a greater repertoire of knowledge, skills, and dispositions to effectively teach all young children, especially DLLs.

## Why I Wrote This Book

As someone who truly cares about the DLL population, I take great joy in writing this book to flex my ideas gathered from primarily four sources:

- The theoretical, research, and practical literature
- My own experience as a DLL
- My experience as a former public school teacher working with DLLs
- My more extensive, decade-long experience as a teacher educator, teaching and supervising preservice and in-service early childhood professionals



First and foremost, this volume demonstrates how theories can be translated into sound educational practices. In so doing, I hope that early childhood educators can become better at teaching young DLLs.

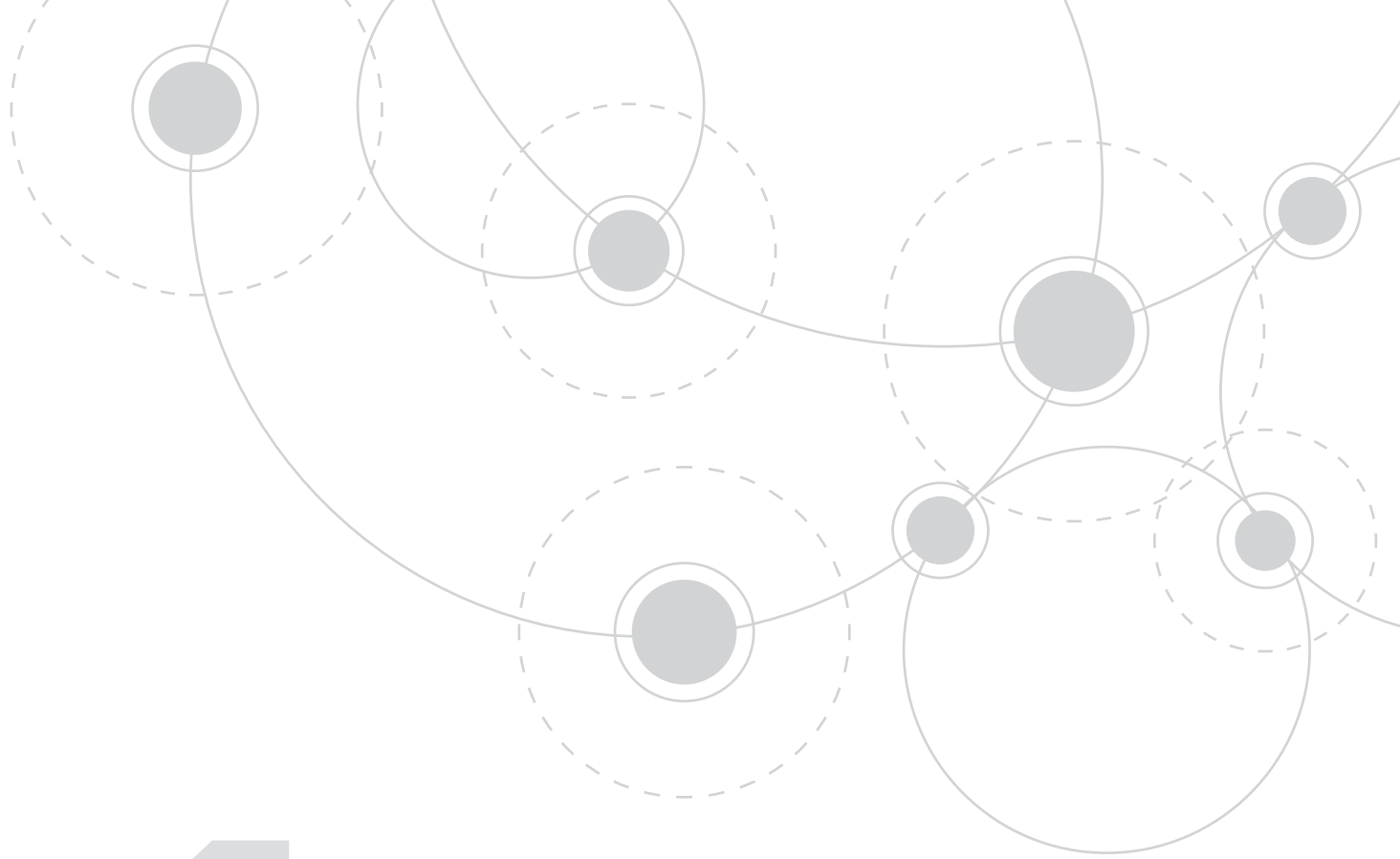
In addition to my professional impetus, I was motivated to write this book for personal reasons. I myself became a DLL when I immigrated to the United States, although I was already a teenager then. Nonetheless, I experienced firsthand how challenging it was to learn to communicate in a second language while striving to maintain my native language of Chinese. As language was so essential to academic success, navigating the language terrain to succeed was not an easy task. Although my teachers did attempt to demonstrate their linguistic and cultural sensitivity and provide their academic support to encourage me to communicate my knowledge verbally and nonverbally, it did take some time for me to feel confident enough to do so.

My own personal experience spurred me to later complete my master's degree in bilingual and bicultural education at Teachers College, Columbia University, where I received rigorous teacher preparation. I then served as a Chinese-English bilingual teacher working directly with Chinese DLLs in an elementary school in New York City, and a few years later as a teacher of English as a second language to Chinese students in a middle school in Boston during my doctoral study at Harvard. Trained intensively in education and psychology, I

drew knowledge from both fields in enhancing my teaching effectiveness and expanding my pedagogical understanding.

However, my most extensive professional experience yet has to be my role as an early childhood teacher educator for ten years at the time of this writing, preparing preservice (mostly undergraduate students) and in-service (graduate students) candidates to acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions to meet the diverse needs of all learners. I have often found that many of these candidates face enormous challenges in working with young DLLs because they have limited professional experience with or personal exposure to these learners. Furthermore, from my own teaching experience and classroom observations, I have noticed that many DLLs struggle with learning to communicate their understanding, intentions, wants, and needs with others verbally and nonverbally in effective ways. As they are increasingly met with more and more DLLs, teachers are faced with additional challenges, but many are not deterred. They seek guidance and opportunities to refine their practices to meet their learners' unique communicative needs. I appreciate books like Karen Nemeth's *Many Languages, One Classroom: Teaching Dual and English Language Learners* and *Many Languages, Building Connections: Supporting Infants and Toddlers Who Are Dual Language Learners*, which provide essential yet easily accessible practical knowledge about teaching DLLs. Similarly, I am writing this book for those teachers and educators who have asked me over the years for guidance and pedagogical suggestions for supporting DLLs' learning and development, and for all of you who are reading it!

Like many early childhood educators, I also believe that teaching and learning is a continuous process. Good teaching strategies are not just good for the learning of DLLs; they are also good for all other children with appropriate modifications. However, good teaching must carry with it a sense of intentionality, as NAEYC's Developmentally Appropriate Practice guidelines advocate. As early childhood educators, you can modify the strategies and activities in this book for small-group, large-group, and one-on-one settings during naturally occurring events such as circle time, mealtime, or play time.



# 1 Learning to Communicate and Communicating to Learn

*Communication is a fundamental human ability and experience. People communicate from birth through nonverbal and verbal behaviors, from an infant's first gaze to the sophisticated verbal interactions of adults. These behaviors achieve a variety of goals, such as expressing emotions, sharing ideas, and indicating needs.*

—Jennifer Chen and Suzanne Shire, "Strategic Teaching: Fostering Communication Skills in Diverse Young Learners"

These ideas appear in the beginning of an article that teacher Suzanne Shire and I published in *Young Children* in 2011. They continue to resonate with our daily observations of communication at work, from the overt or covert messages we are sending to the manner in which we communicate them, all of which reveal our needs, desires, intentions, motivations, and goals to make sense of and connection to the world in general and with others in particular. While learning to communicate effectively, children are also communicating to learn about many things, including academic subjects and social skills. It is, thus, not surprising that the acquisition of effective communication skills is at the heart of a child's learning and development and permeates in all aspects of the preschool curriculum.

You may also already observe that there are many factors that can affect the ways in which we communicate with one another. For example, in your classroom, you may notice that a DLL who has just started learning English prefers to draw a picture to communicate his needs rather than speaking. This nonverbal mode of communication is perfectly acceptable, especially for a child who has not acquired enough English proficiency. Although acceptance of individual differences in communication style is important to show respect, we know that our goal is also to help children acquire the language skills needed to communicate verbally in effective ways with others.

Communication is essentially a social act. Yet, we know that success at this act is not without effort. To perform it successfully with different people, experience tells us that we will need to acquire and then mobilize effective communication skills. These skills depend on verbal (using language and singing) and nonverbal (using sign language, writing, drawing, and dancing) tools.



## Communication as a Social Process

At its very core, communication is a social process that involves interaction with others. Social interaction is crucial because it is a vehicle through which individuals learn, as Vygotsky noted in *Thought and Language*. That is, learning to communicate effectively involves learning to do so in a socially and culturally acceptable manner. As humans, our behaviors are influenced by the sociocultural environment in which we live. In today's culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms, children will find themselves surrounded by peers from various backgrounds. Perhaps you have already witnessed this socio-demographic trend in your own work with young children. We can reasonably expect that if children learned how effective communication could be achieved in the classroom, they would be better poised to anticipate or react to other people's communicative behaviors.

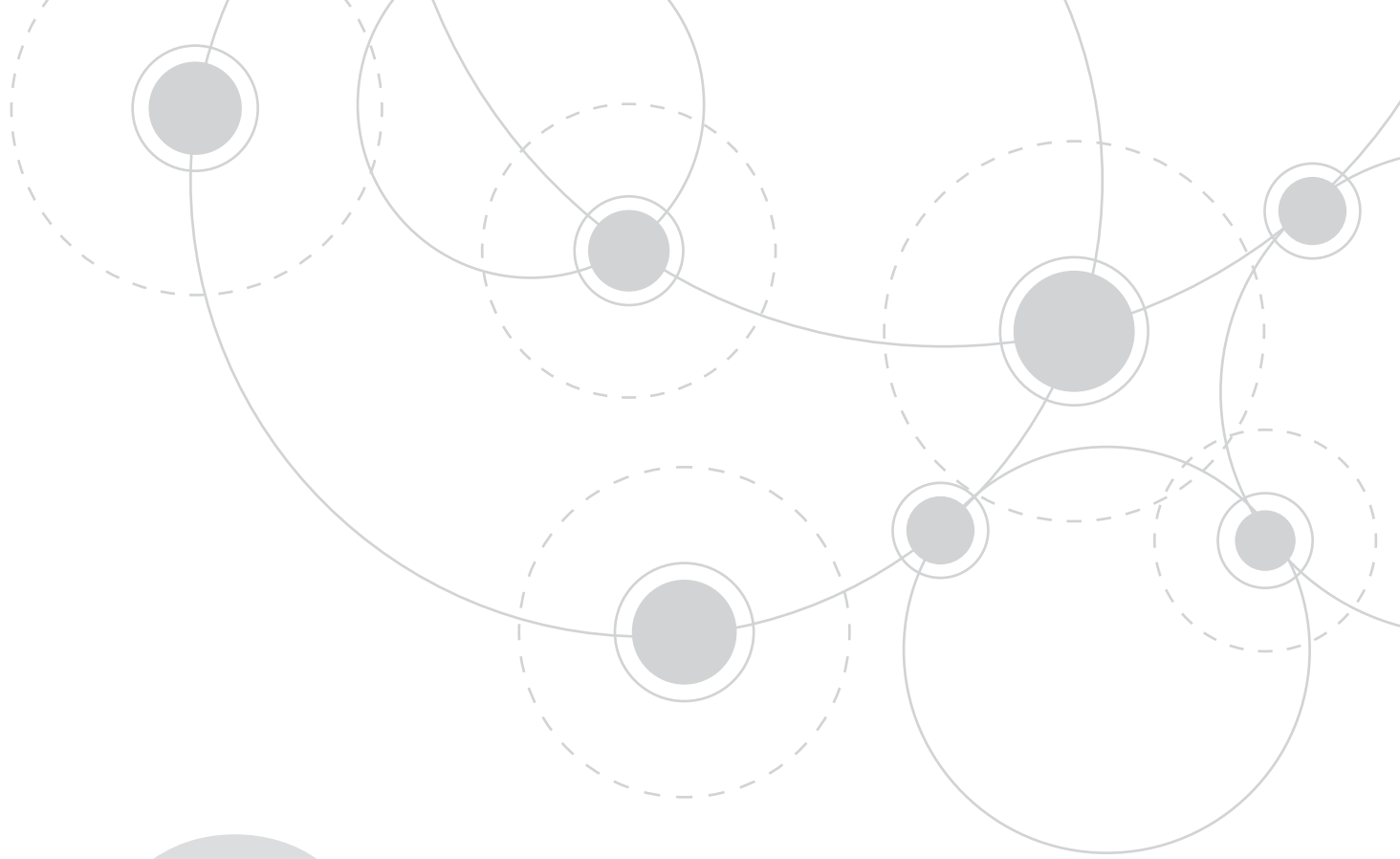
## Communication from a Global Perspective

Our early childhood classrooms are increasingly diverse, due to the constant influx of immigrants from around the world. Interpersonal, intercultural, and cross-cultural communication skills have become vital to our success in human endeavors in today's global world. Culturally and linguistically diverse children and their families are invaluable resources that can enrich our learning. As Marietta Saravia-Shore noted in "Diverse Teaching Strategies for Diverse Learners," a chapter in the book *Educating Everybody's Children*, "Surely a diverse classroom is the ideal laboratory in which to learn the multiple perspectives required by a global society and to put to use information concerning diverse cultural patterns.

Students who learn to work and play collaboratively with classmates from various cultures are better prepared for the world they face now—and the world they will face in the future. Teaching and learning strategies that draw on the social history and the everyday lives of students and their cultures can only assist this learning process."







# 2 Diversity in Early Childhood Settings

*Good schools, like good societies and good families, celebrate and cherish diversity.*

—Deborah Meier, in her book, *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem*



When used to describe people, the term *diversity* encapsulates a wide range of characteristics, including gender, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic class, physical abilities, religious preference, and sexual orientation, as noted by Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode in *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*. Throughout my book, the term *diversity* refers to differences in primarily linguistic and cultural characteristics and learning abilities among young children, especially DLLs. It is critically important for early childhood educators to embrace diversity as a stepping-stone—and not view it as a stumbling block—toward building global competence.

The United States is more diverse than ever. According to Elizabeth Grieco and colleagues, the 2010 American Community Survey estimated that the number of foreign-born people in the United States reached nearly forty million that year, constituting 13 percent of the total population. Today’s DLLs or their families come from many far corners of the globe: Mexico, China, Vietnam, India, and others. In addition to cultural and linguistic diversity, these DLLs also differ in learning strengths.

In the context of this unprecedented trend, the public education system is populated by many children who are immigrants or descendants of immigrants. In a research brief titled *Children in Immigrant Families—The U.S. and 50 States: National Origins, Language, and Early Education*, Donald Hernandez and colleagues reported that one in five children in the United States is either immigrant or has immigrant parents, and this child segment is rising faster than any other child population. This demographic shift has also invariably led to a fast-growing segment of students who are referred to as English language learners (ELLs) by the U.S. Census Bureau and others to describe those who are learning the English



language in addition to their first or native language. According to the National Center for Education Statistics report *The Condition of Education 2014*, nearly one in ten public school students in the 2011–2012 school year was an ELL.

A great variation in the home languages that ELLs speak has also been observed. In 2002, Anneka L. Kindler reported on a survey showing that more than 460 languages were spoken nationwide by ELLs during 2000–2001, with Spanish being the native language spoken by the majority of them. Not only are there many languages spoken by children in U.S. public schools, there are also variations in their language capacities. The fluency levels in oral language and literacy skills in English among ELLs and DLLs span a gamut, from those who are highly fluent in speaking, listening, writing, and reading to those who are struggling in one, more than one, or all of these areas.

The prominent presence of ELLs and DLLs in our public education system is evident. Researchers Wayne Thomas and Virginia Collier projected that by the 2030s, ELLs will make up 40 percent of K–12 students. The current demographic trend urgently calls for early childhood educators to develop a bag of tricks that will help meet the diverse developmental and learning needs of DLLs.

In any given inclusive early childhood classroom in the United States, it is not uncommon to find a group of children with varying learning abilities and disabilities, spanning from those who are gifted and talented to those with special needs. These children will benefit when educators work to identify and implement best practices that meet the special needs of DLLs.

## Diversity Poses Challenges and Opportunities

In this ever-expanding and ever-changing dynamic system of education, teachers, parents, community members, and the children themselves play a key role in serving as an invaluable resource for promoting educational excellence. With the school representing a microcosm of society, the kaleidoscope of cultures and languages experienced by children in the classroom can provide a preview of what they will encounter in society and even in the global world in the future. Children bring to the classroom their unique characteristics, including abilities, personal histories, and cultural heritages. These are rich resources that the teacher and learners can tap into. The great diversity in the classroom can serve as an intellectual platform on which educators can challenge their assumptions, cultivate respect for differences, and develop an expansive, essential toolbox of innovative and effective teaching strategies. Classroom diversity can also serve as an emotional and intellectual playground that gives children opportunities to open their hearts and minds to differences in culture, language, and individual characteristics. They will begin to learn about the varying ways

they think, behave, feel, and communicate with one another. During a conversation with early childhood teacher Suzanne Shire, she observed that “The classroom teacher must now become a ‘master chef’ in preparing a ‘salad bowl’ mixed with rich and unique ingredients that has become today’s American classroom. The recipes for each child’s academic and social success will be as individual and diverse as the children who will benefit from them.”

In my 2015 article titled “Effective Teaching Strategies for Facilitating the Language Acquisition of English Language Learners,” I note, “Teaching ELLs poses particular challenges for educators. Yet, these challenges also present themselves as an opportunity for educators to develop a more expansive repertoire of effective pedagogical strategies to address the diverse developmental, cultural, and linguistic needs of this ever-expanding student population.” In a culturally and linguistically diverse but sensitive classroom, the teacher provides opportunities for children to not just *learn with* one another, but also *learn from* one another, a powerful process through which they can develop critical thinking and view the world from diverse angles. For example, the teacher can encourage children to share and compare cultural differences on a particular subject. As appealing as this idea may sound, the reality is that the teacher must first possess cultural competence to lead and model the appropriate behaviors and practices. In the context of the classroom, the educator needs to develop cultural competence to interact and communicate effectively with the children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and teach the children to do the same.

## Important Dispositions for Teaching

I also believe that any recipe striving to produce successful teaching and learning must include the twin ingredients of care and respect. It starts with the teacher demonstrating a genuine care for the children, including their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, cognitive strengths and needs, and interests. Building on the foundation of care, the teacher can then develop a common ground, mutual respect, not just among all adults and children in the classroom but also with the children’s families. The concepts of care and respect are fundamental; they are essential professional dispositions that a teacher will ideally exhibit all the time in the classroom. When teachers demonstrate care and respect, they are teaching the children to behave in similar ways. More important, when children feel that they are cared for and respected by the teacher, they will likely engage in reciprocal, warm relationships and interactions with the teacher, and become more motivated to learn and excel. From this perspective, it would not be farfetched to say that care, respect, and other like elements are essential driving mechanisms underlying children’s motivation to engage and do their best academically and socially.

## Teaching Strategies for Consideration

The great diversity of children in early childhood programs and classrooms, especially DLLs and those of them with special needs, portends particular challenges for educators working with these children. Whatever these challenges are, if early childhood educators see them also as opportunities to exercise, hone, and advance their practices, they can expand their approaches to teaching to benefit DLLs' learning. Here are some suggested strategies that educators can adopt or adapt to fit their own unique teaching context:

- Cultivate a caring and respectful learning community where all children can feel comfortable, motivated, and confident in what they do. One of the first steps you can take to start cultivating such an atmosphere is to help children learn one another's names (and their meanings, if possible) as well as some greetings and polite phrases. For example: "How are you?" "I am fine. Thank you."
- Design developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate activities that capitalize on the children's intellectual strengths in learning to communicate effectively. Assign DLLs to activities that match their developmental levels and learning needs. For instance, engage Milo, a Spanish-speaking child from Mexico, in a language matching game on the computer that requires him to match some simple Spanish words with their corresponding English words.



- Encourage collaboration and cooperativeness among the children by pairing or grouping DLLs with more linguistically advanced peers when working on hands-on activities (such as building something with blocks or engaging in an art project) that do not require extensive or advanced language skills. Prepare them in advance by teaching them some simple words that they can use with one another during the particular activity.
- Provide symbolic items (such as a stop sign on a craft stick or an emergency bell) and concrete objects (such as photos and writing materials) that are easily accessible around the classroom for DLLs with limited English or with language delays to use to communicate their needs and wants nonverbally.



- Observe and attend to a child's unique communication behavior and cues and then respond to them accordingly. Watch the nonverbal behaviors of a DLL with limited English or with language delays to figure out what he is trying to tell you. Listen to a DLL who can verbally articulate her needs and wants in English. In both cases, although the approach is different, similar strategies can apply, including giving the DLL your undivided attention, kneeling down to the child's level, making eye contact if it is appropriate for the child (eye contact may be intimidating to a child from a culture where such a behavior is not desired), and asking questions to show your care and interest.

- Provide pictures of a variety of emotions or emotion words in the DLLs' native language for a DLL with limited expressive language or emotional skills to choose to show how he feels about something.
- Accept and encourage multiple modes of communication and expression (drawing, writing, acting out, gesturing, and using props). These diverse avenues do not just support communication, they will also help the learners build confidence, motivation, appreciation for aesthetic expression, and motor skills. For instance, it would be appropriate to encourage Aki, a new arrival from Japan who speaks no English, to point to certain illustrations to demonstrate his favorite part of a story. It would be equally appropriate to ask Maria, a Spanish-speaking child with some English proficiency, to talk about her favorite part in the story in English and, if needed, to use Spanish to express what she does not know in English.

Any time new students enter your classroom, whether at the start of a new year or sometime in the middle, you can use your repertoire of skills to make the children feel comfortable and facilitate their learning. By adapting your own practice and trying new approaches, you can meet the children where they are and help move them forward.



# NEW strategies for Communication in a diverse classroom

A teacher cannot succeed if she cannot communicate with every child. Connecting with dual language learners (DLLs) is a growing challenge among early childhood educators; they need to learn practical, proven strategies to reach these students who are yearning to learn and fit in. Grounded in research and supported by the author's personal experience as a student learning English, the information in this book can help you understand the culturally and linguistically diverse children in your classroom, as well as those with disabilities.

## If you wonder why some DLLs...

- seem scared or overwhelmed
- appear to understand but won't speak
- talk to English speakers in their native language
- play by themselves
- stay silent during class
- seem to interact in impolite ways
- have trouble working in pairs or groups
- learn language faster than others

## You'll benefit by knowing...

- ways to make DLLs feel more comfortable
- stages in second-language acquisition
- ways to challenge DLLs without overwhelming them
- how to encourage other children's cooperation
- how to model using polite phrases for DLLs
- strategies for differentiating learning
- assessment methods for language learners
- how to show respect for DLLs' capabilities
- ways to involve families in school activities

By gaining these insights and expanding your repertoire of teaching skills, you can reach out to DLLs and foster a positive classroom environment that helps all children learn and grow together.



As an early childhood teacher educator, **Jennifer J. Chen, EdD**, encourages educators to understand theory to improve their teaching practice. When Chen immigrated to the United States from China as a teenager, she had to learn English. She brings personal insight into the challenges that diverse students face in the classroom. She is an associate professor of early childhood and family studies at Kean University in Union, N.J. Chen was a Fulbright Scholar in 2013–14 in Hong Kong and earned her EdD and EdM from Harvard University.

  
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