Making Cross-Language Connections with our Children

The Linguistic Genius of Dual Language Learners

From the earliest ages, children are keyed into the sounds that surround them, making meaning of those sounds, and learning to label their world and use language to interact with us. As dual language learners they are linguistic geniuses as they go about the task of making sense of their languages, figuring out which languages are used in which context and which grammatical and structural rules apply to which language.

Dual language learners live both within each of their languages and also across their languages. This means they need the skills to analyze and understand both languages and to know how they are similar and different. Research reveals that building cross- language connections and learning what "transfers" and what does not, is an essential part of becoming bilingual.

When learners discover similarities and differences between the two language systems, they become stronger in each language.

What are Cross-Language Connections?

Building cross-language connections is all about helping children focus on similarities and differences between their languages, and in so doing create stronger skills within each language system. This is also commonly referred to as "**transfer**".

Spanish and English are sister languages that have a lot of positive transfer such as a similar alphabet and many shared letter sounds. Once you have learned something in one of the languages, and it applies to the other as well; it doesn't have to be re-learned.

These two languages also share many cognates. These are words that come from the same root and have similar meanings, spellings, and pronunciations. Spanish and English share between 10,000 and 15,000 cognates and this can be a wonderful way to help students bridge their languages and expand their vocabulary.

How can I help?

- Help your child notice language. Start with the sounds that are the same and draw their attention to it as you notice it in stories and songs. Model being a language detective.
- Verbalize similarities and differences:

*"Wow, I see that **m**aestra and **m**ommy both start with the same sound. Look how the m sounds the same in both English and Spanish."*

"I just noticed that comunidad and community sound very similar and mean the same thing."

Have these conversations in your strongest language and focus on their noticing's and share your own. This takes time and is not meant to be another list of skills to memorize. The power is in the dialogue and the building of curiosity about language.

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Spanish English Cross-Language Connections

Positive Transfer: Same/similar sounds				
English Sound	English Written Examples	Spanish Sound	Spanish Written Examples	Notes
/b/	Baby	/b/	Bebé	
/k/	Cat Kit		Capa Karina	The letter "K" rarely appears in Spanish, in borrowed words or names
/f/	Fog	/f/	Fecha	
/g/	Got	/g/	Garras	
/h/	Hit	/j/	Jefe Genial	The various spellings in Spanish of /h/ often cause confusion
/l/	Log	/l/	Limón	
/m/	Man	/m/	Mano	
/n/	Not	/n/	Nombre	
/p/	Pot	/p/	Pelota	
/kw/	Quit	/kw/	Cuidar	
/s/	Sat City	/s/	Sapo Ciudad Zapato	/s/ and /z/ often not distinct in some variations of Spanish
/t/	Tan	/t/	Tortuga	/t/ can vary among Spanish variations
/ks/	Box	/ks/	Texto	
/ch/	Chip	/ch/	Chispa	
"short e"	Pen	/e/	Ven	
"long a"	Plane	"ei"	Reina	
"long e"	Teeth	/i/	Ti	
"long i"	Ice	"ai"	Bailar	
"long o"	Open	/o/	Voz	
"long u"	Use	"yu", "llu"	Lluvia	Only in variations of Spanish where "ll" = /y/ not /j/
"long oo"	Mood	/u/	Puma	
/oi/	Boy	"oi"	Soy	

Sources:
Core Literacy Library. Teaching Reading Sourcebook. Bill Honig, Linda Diamond, & Linda Gutlohn

Spanish-English Biliteracy Transfer (CA Reading and Literature Project)
http://crlpstatewideoffice.ucsd.edu/signature-programs/sebt.html

Additional Reading:
Celebrating Children's Linguistic Genius, H. Skibbins. 2019
https://seal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Soleado-Fall-2019-Seal.pdf

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Negative Transfer: Differences across languages				
English Sound	**English Written Examples**	**Spanish Sound**	**Sp. Written Examples**	Notes
/d/	Dog		Dedo	/d/ is often confused with /th/ because of the placement of the tongue
/j/	Jog	/λ/	Yo Llave Jessica	/y/ and /j/ often sound the same to Spanish speakers. "LL" makes the same sound as "Y" in some varieties of Sp.
/r/	Rain		Para	Significant difference in pronunciation
		/ r̄ /	Barro Rana	"rr" is not rolled in English, ie: carrier
/sh/	Ship			/sh/ and /ch/ often not distinct in Spanish. Ex) Shop and Chop
/ng/	Sing			often pronounced /n/ by Sp.
/v/	Van			Letters "V" and "B" both make /b/ sound in Spanish
/y/	Yes	/λ/	Yo Llave	/y/ and /j/ often sound the same to Spanish speakers
/z/	Zipper		Zapato	/z/, /zh/ and /s/ are not distinct in some variations of Spanish
/zh/	Measure			/z/, /zh/ and /s/ are not distinct in some variations of Spanish
"Short o"	Top	/a/	Paz	"Short o" approximates the Spanish "a"
/ow/	Cow		Ahora	/ow/ approximates Spanish "ao"

Zero Transfer: Exists in one language and not the other				
English Sound	**English Written Examples**	**Spanish Sound**	**Spanish Written Examples**	Notes
/w/	Wig		Wilfredo	The letter "W" rarely appears in Spanish, mostly in borrowed words or names and is pronounced /b/ or /oo/
/th/	That	N/A		/th/ often pronounced as /d/
/th/	Thing	N/A		/th/ often pronounced as /t/
		/ /	Humo	"H" has no sound in Spanish
"short a"	Cat	N/A		
"Short I"	Pin	N/A		Short vowels "i" and "e" often sound the same to Spanish speakers, ex) Pin and Pen
"Short u"	Cup	N/A		
"schwa"	The About Common	N/A		Causes confusion in phonics because it can be represented by various letters in English
"short oo"	Cook	N/A		
/aw/	Paw	N/A		Confused with /a/ as in papá
/er/	Her	N/A		

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