



# One Child, Two Languages

SECOND EDITION



A Guide for  
Early Childhood Educators  
of Children Learning English  
as a Second Language



**Patton O. Tabors**

Forewords by  
Mariela M. Pérez  
and Catherine E. Snow

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by

**Patton O. Tabors, Ed.D.**  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

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## About the Author

**Patton O. Tabors, Ed.D.**, retired in 2005 as Principal Research Associate at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Prior to beginning her doctoral studies at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1981, Dr. Tabors was an elementary school teacher and a childbirth educator. Her doctoral studies focused on first- and second-language acquisition in young children. Her dissertation research described the developmental pathways of a group of young children learning English as a second language, which she later wrote about in the first edition of *One Child, Two Languages* (Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 1997).



From 1987 until 2003, Dr. Tabors was the research coordinator of the Home–School Study of Language and Literacy Development in collaboration with Catherine E. Snow and David K. Dickinson. She and Dr. Dickinson co-edited *Beginning Literacy with Language: Young Children Learning at Home and School* (Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2001), which was based on the study’s findings about the relationship between early childhood interactions and kindergarten language and literacy skills. More recently, Dr. Tabors co-authored, with Catherine E. Snow, Michelle V. Porche, and Stephanie R. Harris, *Is Literacy Enough? Pathways to Academic Success for Adolescents* (Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2007), which explains factors beyond K–3 literacy that influenced students’ later school success in the Home–School Study of Language and Literacy Development.

Dr. Tabors also directed research related to low-education and low-income mothers reading to their preschool-age children as part of the Manpower Development Research Corporation evaluations of two welfare-to-work projects—New Chance and JOBS—and was the director of research for the Harvard Language Diversity Project, a subproject of the New England Research Center on Head Start Quality, directed by Dr. Dickinson.

In 2000, Dr. Tabors became the principal investigator of a longitudinal project, the Early Childhood Study of Language and Literacy Development of Spanish-Speaking Children, which followed a sample

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of more than 300 bilingual children from preschool to second grade. With her colleagues, Dr. Mariela M. Páez and Dr. Lisa M. López, she has used the findings from this study to continue to inform the ongoing discussion about young children and second-language and -literacy acquisition.



# Introduction

**T**hree-year-old Chantal lives in a small city in Massachusetts with her 5-year-old brother, her 20-year-old half-sister, and her mother and father. Chantal and her brother were born in Massachusetts, but their parents and their half-sister immigrated to the United States during a time of political strife in Haiti. Chantal's father works at a hospital as an orderly, and her half-sister takes English as a Second Language classes at the community college and has a job as a housekeeper at a local hotel. Chantal speaks Haitian Creole at home with her family.

This year Chantal has been enrolled in a Head Start classroom near her home. When she first came to the classroom, she did not speak any English, but during the course of the school year, she has begun to use some English during interactions with the English-speaking teachers and children. When Chantal's mother comes to pick up Chantal at school each day, she nods and smiles at the teachers but is unable to carry on any conversation with them about Chantal's activities. After helping to clear one of the tables used for the children's lunch, Chantal's mother collects Chantal and leaves the classroom. When the teachers want to schedule a home visit with Chantal's mother, they ask a social services worker who speaks Haitian Creole to make the appointment and to accompany them on the visit to translate for them.

Chantal's family is just one of many families that have immigrated to the United States in recent years, increasing the population of nonnative English speakers. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that 20% of the people older than 5 years of age who participated in the American Community Survey of 2005 reported speaking a language other than



English. The languages represented in this population were as follows: Spanish, 62%; Indo-European languages, 19.1%; Asian/Pacific Islander, 15%; and others (including Native American, Arabic, Hebrew, and African languages), 4% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

Not surprisingly, the arrival of large numbers of immigrant families has had an effect on early childhood education. For example, Head Start classrooms such as the one Chantal attended have experienced a sharp increase in the enrollment of children from other than English-speaking homes. In 2002, the English Language Learners Focus Group Report stated that

approximately 27% of the children served by Head Start speak a language other than English at home and more than 140 languages are represented in Head Start programs nationwide. The linguistic representation of English language learners enrolled in Head Start programs is predominantly Spanish-speaking. The 2000–2001 Head Start Program Information Report (PIR) data on 900,000 children by dominant language indicated that 201,486 were Spanish language speakers; . . . 13,419 were speakers of Asian languages; 2,416 were enrolled as Native American language speakers; and 26,827 were speakers of other languages. (p. 3)

Children such as Chantal now make up a considerable proportion of the children in many early childhood programs of all types. It can be anticipated that a large percentage of these young children are native Spanish speakers but that a myriad of other languages are represented



as well. Although early childhood programs in certain areas of the United States are most heavily affected, almost all early childhood programs are affected in some way. Planning ways to serve these young children effectively is now a major challenge for early childhood educators.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SETTINGS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Early childhood education programs, from small family child care programs to private or public programs or child care facilities to federally funded Head Start programs, have responded to the arrival of English-language-learning children by developing programs that deal with the linguistic needs of these children in different ways. One useful way to categorize these programs is related to how language is used in the classroom.

Early childhood education settings can be divided into three major categories related to language use (see Table 1). In the following paragraphs, each type of setting is described, and an example is presented

**Table 1.** Types of early childhood education settings for children from other than English-speaking homes in the United States

	First-language classroom	Bilingual classroom	English-language classroom
Teachers	Native speakers of L1 <sup>a</sup>	Bilingual in L1 and English or native speaker of L1 paired with native speaker of English	Native speakers of English
Children	Native speakers of L1	All native speakers of L1 or mixture of L1 and English speakers	Native speakers of L1 or native speakers of different L1s or either of above and English speakers
Classroom organization	All interaction in L1	Interaction split between L1 and English	All interaction in English
Language outcomes	Development of L1; no development of English	Maintenance or development of L1, while also developing English	Development of English; no maintenance or development of L1

<sup>a</sup>L1 any specific native language that is not English.

from a series of ethnographies completed as part of a research project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (Tabors, Aceves, Bartolomé, Páez, & Wolf, 2000).

The first type of setting is one in which the home or first language of the child is the primary language of the classroom. For Spanish-speaking children, this means that the teachers must be native speakers of Spanish; for Arabic speakers, this means that the teachers must be native speakers of Arabic. This kind of classroom is a first-language classroom.

Advocates of first-language classrooms for children from other than English-speaking homes (e.g., Wong Fillmore, 1991b) emphasize the importance of the development of the first language as a necessary basis for later literacy and, consequently, for later school success. These advocates are particularly concerned that young children are highly susceptible to losing their first language if the first language is not strongly maintained during the early childhood years. Their conclusion, therefore, is that children should attend first-language early childhood education settings and should not be exposed to a second-language setting before elementary school. Even then, they believe, there should be a strong developmental first-language program throughout the early elementary years to establish literacy in the first language.

This attitude was strongly supported by the teachers in the Spanish-language Head Start classroom for 3-year-olds that was established as part of the previously mentioned research project. In this classroom, the teachers, both of whom were native speakers of Spanish, were encouraged to use Spanish for the first time in their teaching careers. The children came from homes in which Spanish was at least one of the languages being spoken. One of the teachers, Sara, talked about the benefits of Spanish-language instruction for the children: "I saw it right at the beginning of the year. . . . The kids understand and respond. . . . Sometimes we do a lot more than what I used to do with my other classes. . . ." (Tabors, Aceves, Bartolomé, et al., 2000, p. 431). Alicia, the second teacher in the classroom,

argued that second-language learning would be greatly facilitated once the bilingual children had a strong home-language foundation, "[l]o importante es enseñar su primer idioma . . . no van a tener problemas en aprender inglés—pero vamos a darle una buena base para que ellos sigan construyendo encima de su base." [*What is important is to teach them their native language . . . they won't have problems learning English—but let's give them a good base on which to construct meaning.*] (Tabors, Aceves, Bartolomé, et al., 2000, p. 431)

A second type of early childhood education setting is one in which there are individual teachers who are themselves bilingual or in which

there are two teachers who have different language backgrounds. For instance, in a classroom that serves Mandarin-speaking children, one teacher in the classroom may be English speaking and the other may speak Mandarin; or in a classroom that serves children who have recently come to the United States from Haiti, the teacher may be bilingual in Haitian Creole and English. In these situations, language choice becomes an issue: Which language is being spoken to whom, by whom, and under what circumstances? This type of classroom is a bilingual classroom.

Bilingual early childhood education settings may take a variety of forms. In some settings, all of the children come from one particular other than English language background, and only the teacher or teachers communicate with the children in English. At the other end of the spectrum are two-way bilingual or dual language programs, in which approximately half of the children in any given classroom are from the same other than English-speaking backgrounds and the other half are from English-speaking backgrounds. In these programs, instruction is scheduled so that both languages are used in meaningful ways during the day or during the week. In this situation, each child's first language is supported while a second language is added and children have second-language input from other children, not just from their teacher.

The bilingual classroom that was visited for the research project was led by Brenda, a proficient English-Spanish bilingual. A second teacher, María, was Spanish dominant. All but two of the children had some Spanish-language proficiency at the beginning of the school year. In this classroom, Spanish and English were spoken alternately during the day by both the teachers and the children. "In an interview, Brenda stated she strongly believed children should have the choice of speaking their home language at school. . . . 'In my classroom, everything is done in English and Spanish—this is how children learn'" (Tabors, Aceves, Bartolomé, et al., 2000, p. 422). The two teachers told us that they made decisions about which language to use with the children based on their assessment of the children's preferences and proficiencies. However, interestingly enough, although Brenda often spoke Spanish with the Spanish-speaking children during individual or small-group activities, she always conducted large-group activities, such as book reading and circle time, in English. In this way, she turned group time into an English-language-learning opportunity.

The third type of early childhood education setting is one in which the primary language is English, even though there are children in the classroom whose home language is not English. In this situation, the teachers may have little or no proficiency in a language other than

English, and their classroom may include children from only one language group or from many different language groups. This type of classroom is an English-language classroom.

In an English-language classroom, the teacher or teachers use English for almost all interactions; therefore, in such a classroom, a child whose home language is not English will not have his or her language supported, although there may be other children from the same language background with whom to talk and play. These classrooms can be a more or less welcoming location for a child whose home language is not English, depending on how multicultural the curriculum is and on what efforts the teachers make to bring parents and other cultural representatives into the classroom.

The two teachers in the English-language classroom in the research study were both native speakers of English, and the children came from five different first-language backgrounds (Haitian Creole, Barbadian Creole, Spanish, Japanese, and English). In this classroom, the teachers relied on English to get their messages across, often augmenting their words with gestures. Early in the year, the head teacher, Robert, “explained that he believes that immersion in an exclusively English-language classroom helps children learn the language more quickly and easily. He believes their progress is slowed down when they can rely on their home language to communicate at school” (Tabors, Aceves, Bartolomé, et al., 2000, p. 414). Interestingly, however, when a Spanish-speaking student teacher came to the classroom in the spring, Robert mentioned that he was still thinking through his ideas about native language use and did not discourage her from using Spanish with the Spanish-speaking children.

In the real world, of course, it is sometimes difficult to categorize actual programs. Therefore, these categories are meant merely as guidelines under which teachers and administrators of early childhood education settings can locate their programs in relation to a set of features that have been found to be consistent across a variety of settings.

These categories are also useful when thinking about the material in this book. Because much of the research and most of the examples in this book come from an English-language early childhood education setting, it is this setting that serves as a baseline for discussing second-language learning in young children. In addition, discussions of how language acquisition processes would differ in a bilingual classroom are included. Because second-language acquisition is not a goal of first-language classrooms, such classrooms are not a topic of this book except when they are discussed with regard to supplementary settings, such as special-purpose Saturday or Sunday schools.

## FIRST- AND SECOND-LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

When young children such as Chantal are enrolled in an English-language or bilingual early childhood education setting, they begin the process of second-language acquisition. To start the process of thinking about second-language acquisition, it is useful first to review how children learn a first language and then use that process as a contrast to second-language learning.

### First-Language Acquisition

All typically developing children learn a first language, whichever language that may be. This process, which occurs in the context of social interaction within the child's family structure, begins with the production of recognizable sounds around the age of 1 year and continues intensively throughout early childhood. In fact, although most of the basic skills of oral language are acquired by the time a child is about 5 years old, more advanced uses of language (e.g., debating, lecturing) may continue to be acquired well into adulthood, and vocabulary acquisition is a lifelong process.

Acquiring a first language is a monumental task. To understand what a large task this is, one might think of the language system as a puzzle with a variety of interlocking pieces, all of which must fit together for the puzzle to be complete. There are five pieces of this puzzle:

1. *Phonology*, or the sounds of the language
2. *Vocabulary*, or the words of the language
3. *Grammar*, or how the words are put together to make sentences in the language
4. *Discourse*, or how sentences are put together to, for example, tell stories, make an argument, or explain how something works
5. *Pragmatics*, or the rules about how to use the language

For children to be considered native speakers of a language, they must have control over all of these aspects of the language system. Developing this control is a major undertaking of the first 5 years of a child's life. In the following discussion, the first language acquisition process is discussed using English as the example language, but the same discussion could apply to other languages just as well.

The process of language development begins with a baby's babbling. At first, babies babble a wide variety of sounds; over time, they begin to restrict their babbling to sounds they hear in words spoken by

those around them. When infants being raised in an English-speaking environment are 5–8 months old, they start producing syllables such as *ba*, *ma*, and *ga* in the course of their babbling. Open syllables such as these are relatively easy to pronounce and thus form the basis for many “baby talk” words such as *mama*, *booboo*, and *peepee*. Words that contain closed syllables, those with a consonant at the end, are harder to pronounce, especially if quite different consonants need to be articulated within one syllable. Thus, young children learning English often say “goggie” for *doggie* or “guck” for *truck*, because they simply cannot yet pronounce two different sounds such as /g/ and /d/ or /t/ in one syllable.

Between 12 and 18 months of age, most babies produce their first word or words, having made the connection between certain groups of sounds and objects or certain groups of sounds and “getting things done.” A baby’s first 50 words usually contain a mix of different types of words: names for important people such as *daddy*, object names such as *cookie*, functional words such as *up*, and social words such as *bye-bye*.

After acquiring a number of words, children begin demonstrating an understanding of the grammatical requirements of language by combining first two and then more words, thus developing the ability to express more complex relationships with their words. At first a child will say “kitty” to represent everything from “there’s a cat” to “I’m scared of that cat,” and it will be necessary for an adult to interpret the full meaning. Soon, however, the child will combine “kitty” with an attribute such as “pretty,” an action such as “bite,” or a location such as “outside,” thus beginning the process of building the grammatical units that are sentences.

Throughout this period, children are also learning the proper ways to use their words. *Hi* and *bye-bye* are words that are acquired early, perhaps because parents in American culture work hard to get their babies to produce these words at the proper times to show that they are being socialized correctly. At the same time, babies also learn the turn-taking rules of conversation, often before they have anything to contribute to the conversation. In exchanges between mothers and infants, mothers even consider burps as appropriate turn-taking moves by babies.

The process of learning the culturally appropriate way to use language continues throughout the early childhood years as children learn the rules of politeness and the “ins and outs” of what can appropriately be said where, when, under what conditions, and to whom. Because these rules are complicated and subtle, young children often violate

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them, giving the authors of cartoons a wealth of material (see, e.g., *Rose Is Rose* comic strip).

During the early childhood years, children engage in extended oral language development. Building on the earlier development of sounds, children begin work on rhyming and identifying initial sounds in words, often showing endless fascination with this type of word play. At the same time, they acquire a staggering 6–10 new words daily while also broadening their understanding of the meanings of the words they already know.

Children also begin to acquire the more complicated forms of grammar during this time period; in English, these are past tenses, embedded clauses, and passive constructions. This process frequently results in creative mistakes such as “My mom brokeaded the plate,” which show that children are noticing consistent patterns and applying them to the language system as they understand it.

A distinctive accomplishment of this period is the development of the ability to construct discourse. Young children begin to participate in the construction of explanations, the development of arguments, and the telling of narratives. In American culture, these efforts begin by being co-constructed with an older sibling or adult. In this process, the sibling or adult asks appropriate questions (“What did you do at school today?”) and the child responds (“I climbed to the top of the structure!”). Gradually the child takes on more of the burden of the telling until he or she can produce the type of discourse independently (see Figure 1).

During this time, children also learn to modify what they are saying depending on the audience. A child learns, for example, that he has to give Aunt Sarah, who does not know all of his friends, a lot more background information about *who*, *why*, and *where* before launching into a story about a disaster at the playground.

Of course, in addition to providing children with the means to

Brad: I want to go to the ice cream store.  
 Mother: **Well, you can't. It's raining.**  
 Brad: Did you see the ice cream store man go home?  
 Mother: I don't know. I don't know what time they close. Maybe we could put on our rain coats.  
 Brad: Do you got a rain coat?  
 Mother: No, but I'll wear something.  
 Grandmother: I'll let Mommy use my umbrella.  
 Brad: If she has . . . (Thunder cracks outside.). Thunder.  
 Mother: Thunder.  
 Grandmother: Mmhm.  
 Brad: *We can run to the ice cream store. Then we can run back home. And so the thunder won't get us, right?*  
 Mother: Right.  
 Grandmother: **You know what the thunder is?**  
 Brad: **Yeah. Thunder and lightning.**  
 Grandmother: **Yeah. And the thunder is when the angels are upstairs bowling. And that's one of them just got a spare.**  
 Mother: Brad should get out his Berenstain Bear. I'm going to have to let Ma read it and that'll tell her what thunder is, huh? (laughing)  
 Grandmother: Mmhm.  
 Mother: Tells all about thunder and . . .  
 Grandfather: **That's the energy. Thunder is caused by energy in the clouds.**  
 Brad: *Yeah, but one day I was sleeping in my bed for a long long time and thunder and lightning came from outside and I was trying to find something that was yellow outside in the dark all by itself. And it came out. And it was thunder and lightning and I hid from it.*  
 Grandfather: *And you hid from it?*  
 Brad: Yeah.  
 Grandfather: *Where'd you hide? Under your blankets?*  
 Brad: *No, under my covers. Like when I was sleeping.*  
 Grandfather: Do you always pull the covers up over your head? Yeah?

**Figure 1.** A mealtime conversation showing explanations (distinguished in bold) and narratives (distinguished in italic) between Brad (3½ years old) and his mother, grandmother, and grandfather. (From Beals, D., & Snow, C. [1994]. "Thunder is when the angels are upstairs bowling": Narratives and explanations at the dinner table. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 4[4], 341–343; reprinted by permission.)

communicate with others, these skills in oral language have been closely linked to literacy development in young children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). A longitudinal study of English-speaking children from low-income backgrounds showed that early language input at home and in early childhood education settings is predictive of liter-



acy abilities in kindergarten (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001) and that kindergarten abilities are highly predictive of fourth-grade reading comprehension (Snow, Porche, Tabors, & Harris, 2007). Therefore, starting off well in a first language has been shown to have a direct link to later school success.

## Second-Language Acquisition

Some young children develop language skills in not only a first language but also in a second language. When this happens, the child is considered to be involved in a process of second-language acquisition.

There are two types of second-language acquisition among young children: simultaneous and sequential acquisition. Simultaneous acquisition of two languages occurs when children are exposed to both languages from a very early age, sometimes as a result of each parent speaking a separate language with the child or both parents speaking one language and a caregiver speaking another language with the child. Sequential acquisition occurs when a child begins to learn a second language after the first language is at least partly established.

**Simultaneous Acquisition** When young children are exposed to two languages from birth, there is often an initial period of acquiring words in one or the other of the languages. Children will quickly demonstrate a capacity to keep their two languages separate, however, and often display an early developing understanding of when one or the other of their languages should be used (for case studies, see Fantini, 1985; Saunders, 1988; and Taeschner, 1983).

Taeschner (1983), for example, wrote about raising her two daughters as German-Italian bilinguals living in Rome. Although she is a German-Italian bilingual herself, Taeschner spoke only German with her children, and her husband, a native speaker of Italian, spoke only Italian with the girls. By the time the older daughter, Lisa, was 1½ years old, her vocabulary consisted of 18 words: 6 in German, 6 in Italian, and 6 that would work in either language (e.g., *mama*). Lisa was using 100 words 5 months later: 46 were Italian, 34 were German, and 20 (many of which were names for people) would work in either language. In the intervening time, Lisa had had more contact with Italian speakers because she had spent time with an Italian grandparent and aunt as well as with an Italian-speaking caregiver. As Taeschner remarked,

It is clear that there is a close relationship between the amount of contact with each language and the child's linguistic output; the quantity of contact the child had with each language determined the quantity

of words she learned. When Lisa had more opportunities of speaking Italian, her output increased, and the same was true of German. (1983, p. 194)

Although some parents and educators worry about the possibility of language confusion in situations in which children are exposed to two languages from birth (see Meisel, 1989, for evidence against language confusion), researchers think that, far from being a problem, the process of acquiring two languages from an early age has cognitive as well as social benefits (Hakuta, 1986).

**Sequential Acquisition** Other children acquire a second language after the basis for their first language has been established. This sequential acquisition of a second language occurs, for instance, when a young child such as Chantal enters an early childhood setting in which her home language is not the language used in the classroom. It is this type of second-language acquisition that is the topic of this book.

If a child learns two languages simultaneously, and if those two languages are developed equally during childhood, then the language development process is expected to be the same for both languages. In any sequential second-language acquisition situation, however, there are a number of factors that make the two processes different.

First, second-language learners, even young ones, already have prior knowledge of language and its uses. In the process of learning a first language, they have determined what communication is all about and, furthermore, what particular systems and styles of communication work in their immediate environment. For these children, then, second-language acquisition is not a process of discovering what language *is* but, rather, of discovering what *this* language is.

Second, unlike first-language acquisition, which is a feature of a specific developmental period in a child's life, second-language acquisition can be undertaken at any age. There are two variables related to second-language acquisition and age: cognitive capacity and cognitive demand. The older a child is when facing any cognitive challenge, the greater the child's cognitive capacity will be to take on that challenge. A high school student obviously has many more intellectual skills to bring to bear in any learning situation than does a student in kindergarten. The cognitive demands of the tasks that a high school student faces, however, are also much greater than those a kindergarten student faces. The idea that young children are facile, even magically rapid, language learners is no doubt derived from how little language ability they need to possess to impress someone with their language abilities.

Third, whereas learning a first language is a relatively unproblematic endeavor for typically developing children, second-language ac-



quisition is a much riskier business in which individual characteristics may well play a large part. The following factors have all been proposed as making a difference in second-language acquisition:

1. *An aptitude factor:* Some people are more talented than others as second-language learners.
2. *A social factor:* Some people are more outgoing and more willing than others to take risks as second-language learners.
3. *A psychological factor:* Some people are more motivated than others because they want to become like the people who speak the language they are trying to learn.

In assessing the progress that an individual child is making in a second language, it may be necessary to take some or all of these factors into consideration.

What about the literacy development process when a child is a second-language learner? Given that research has established the link between oral language development and literacy, what happens to this sequence when a second language is introduced? Clearly, if children maintain their home-language development and are placed in learning-to-read situations that capitalize on that home language, then the same developmental sequence can occur. In fact, this is the process supported by bilingual education, in which children are taught to read in their

first language while gaining proficiency in English, and then literacy skills are expected to transfer from their first language to English. However, as mentioned previously, there is concern about young children not developing their first language completely once they are exposed to a second language, thus making them inappropriate candidates for bilingual education. All of these issues remain the subject of research and are of great concern to early childhood educators.

## WHAT EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SECOND-LANGUAGE LEARNING

Given what is known about first-language development and about the differences between first- and second-language acquisition, what do early childhood educators need to know to be able to meet the challenge of making the early childhood education experience as optimal as possible for second-language-learning children? The goal of this book is to answer the following questions.

1. *What are the social and linguistic factors that affect a child whose home language is not English when that child comes to an early childhood classroom in which English is used?* When children from homes in which English is not the home language begin attending an early childhood classroom in which English is one of the languages used, they need to adjust to a new social and linguistic situation. Chapter 2 discusses what this means for these children in terms of social and linguistic constraints.

2. *What is the likely path of development for a young child learning a second language?* There is a different developmental path taken by young second-language learners than that for first-language learners. Early childhood educators need to know what this developmental path is to be able to observe, plan, assess, and serve second-language learning children. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss this developmental path, and Chapter 5 discusses individual differences among young second-language learners.

3. *What is the teacher's role, and what can be done in the classroom for second-language-learning children?* The teacher's role in the early childhood classroom that includes second-language-learning children needs to be broadened to include ways of communicating with these children as well as ways to adjust the curriculum to be as responsive as possible to their needs. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss classroom-based strategies for working with second-language-learning children.

4. *What can teachers tell parents about what parents can do to help?* Parents of second-language–learning children will have many questions about their child’s developmental progress in language as well as in all other areas. They may have questions about their child’s social isolation in the classroom, the possibility of first-language loss, the perceived need to learn English rapidly, the next stage of their children’s education, and myriad other concerns. Chapter 8 provides strategies for helping parents to understand the importance of these issues and for mapping out ways to help parents make decisions that will benefit their children.

5. *How can early childhood educators tell when intervention is necessary with a second-language–learning child?* Early childhood educators are often called upon to assess whether a child’s behavior warrants further investigation for intervention. Because communicative factors related to language affect children’s social behavior, it is often difficult for early childhood educators to know whether certain behaviors in second-language–learning children are indicative of true developmental delay or are merely due to the pressures of the new social environment to which the children are being exposed. Chapter 9 discusses the ways in which teachers and administrators can assess the needs of these children.

6. *What does this information about the second-language–learning process for young children mean for effective early childhood programs?* Chapter 10 discusses the ways in which this information fits with the recommendations of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) concerning responses to linguistic and cultural diversity.

7. *What about children who are adopted from other countries? Do these children follow the same pathway for second-language acquisition as bilingual children? What can early childhood educators do to help these children?* It is important to know that children adopted from other countries early in their lives are likely to follow a different linguistic acquisition pattern than the pathway of second language acquisition described in this book. Research results with this special group of children and recommendations for how early childhood educators can work with these children and their families are presented in Chapter 11.

## **SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT SECOND-LANGUAGE–LEARNING CHILDREN**

A variety of sources of information are used in answering these questions, including previous studies by other researchers and classroom

observations and interviews with teachers, parents, and administrators conducted by the author. One of the primary sources of information about what occurs in a classroom with young second-language learners is a study I conducted during 2 years in an English-language classroom (Tabors, 1984, 1987; Tabors & Snow, 1994). The following brief description of the classroom, the teachers, the children, and my role in the classroom provides context for the discussion of much of the information in the book.

## The Classroom Setting

The setting for the study was an English-language early childhood classroom located on the second floor of a high-rise apartment building at a local university. The apartment building was used by the university for married graduate student housing, and many families from outside the United States lived in the building and sent their children to the center. All of the families whose children attended the center had some affiliation with the university.

## The Teachers

The teachers in the classroom during the study were Marion, the head teacher; Rosa, the assistant teacher during the first year; and Joanne, the assistant teacher during the second year. Marion was an experienced early childhood educator. In an interview, Marion mentioned that she considered her way of running a classroom to be halfway between the extremes of very open and very structured. From my observations, I would say that she was a confident teacher with a highly verbal style who related well to the students on an adult level. She was a native speaker of English and rarely attempted to use words from the home languages of the children who were English language learners.

Rosa, the assistant teacher during the first year of the study, was a native Spanish speaker who came to the United States from Cuba when she was 11 years old. However, she spoke English in the classroom because there were no Spanish speakers among the children. Her interactions with the children were relaxed and playful. She was a frequent leader of circle time, and she was clever at getting and holding the children's attention.

Joanne, the assistant teacher during the second year of the study, was also a native speaker of English. She was very involved in the children's activities and was a frequent participant in their play. She often adopted a lightly teasing or playful technique with the children, which delighted the children and made her very popular in the classroom.

## The Children

There were 15 children in the classroom at any one time. The children ranged from 2 years, 9 months to 5 years of age at the beginning of the school year. The children from the study classroom who are described in this book are listed in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2, the children who were learning English as a second language came from a variety of countries and home-language backgrounds. Because of this variety, it was unusual to hear children using their home languages in the classroom, although it was certainly not discouraged by the teachers. Except for the Korean girls, who did form their own play group on occasion, most of the children found playmates and activities that placed them in circumstances in which English was the primary language used.

**Table 2.** Children in the English-language study classroom during the 2-year study

Name <sup>a</sup>	Sex	Place of origin	Home language
Akemi	F	Japan	Japanese
Andrew	M	United States	English
Byong-sun	M	Korea	Korean
Elena	F	USSR	Russian
James	M	United States	English
Jennifer	F	United States	English
Jessica	F	United States	English
Kaori	F	Japan	Japanese
Kumiko	F	Japan	Japanese
Leandro	M	Brazil	Portuguese
Ling Ling	F	Taiwan	Taiwanese
Matthew	M	United States	English
Miguel	M	Puerto Rico	Spanish
Myong	F	Korea	Korean
Naoshi	M	Japan	Japanese
Natalie	F	United States	English
Pierre	M	France	French
Poram	F	Korea	Korean
Rebecca	F	United States	English
Sally	F	United States	English
Sook-whan	F	Korea	Korean
Supat	M	Thailand	Thai
Taro	M	Japan	Japanese

<sup>a</sup>The children's names have been changed.

## Inside the Classroom

The study classroom was a large room with windows all along one side overlooking the playground. The room was divided into several areas that served different purposes. The block area was located in one corner of the room along the side with the windows. It was a carpeted area used for all group activities as well as a building area for blocks. The blocks were kept in the bookcases that divided the block area from the house area. Also available in the block area were toy trains and tracks, large toy trucks and buses, people figures, and plastic toy animals.

The house area occupied the other corner of the room along the window side. This area contained a large wooden structure that served as a playhouse underneath and a loft area above that was reached by climbing a ladder. The playhouse was furnished with child-size kitchen equipment and a table and chairs; the loft was furnished with pillows and books. Also available in this area were a full-length mirror and a large collection of dress-up clothes.

Opposite the house, attached to a central column that divided the room in half, were a bed area and a storage area for more books. Along one wall of the playhouse was a carpeted bench. Near the bench was a large round table that was often used for puzzles or other, similar manipulative activities. Along the wall behind the puzzle table were shelves where puzzles, LEGO pieces, and other games were stored.

There were two other rectangular tables in the classroom that were used for art or other projects during the free play period and for snack and lunch later in the morning. Typical activities at these tables included playing with playdough, drawing, and painting. Along the inside wall of the classroom was the water/sand table that could be used for play when filled with water or sand but acted as a storage surface when not otherwise in use.

The overall feeling of the room was of a bright, pleasant environment decorated primarily with the children's own artwork and set up in a fashion similar to many other early childhood classrooms.

## Organization of Classroom Time

The first 1½ hours in the morning was a free play period. During this time, children were typically offered a group of activity options from which to choose. Several projects might be put out on the activity tables, such as LEGO pieces, playdough, or drawing equipment, or a special project (e.g., pizza making) might be organized by one of the teachers. Children also had free access to the block and house areas during the



free play periods and could develop their own play activities. Most of the children moved freely around the room, choosing first one kind of activity and then another, depending on what interested them at the moment. The teachers guided children in their choices if they seemed to be undecided and made sure that all of the children had completed a project if it was meant as an all class project.

A brief cleanup period followed free play. Cleanup time was heralded with a cleanup song, and the teachers helped children put away toys and other activities that had been used during the free play period. This was followed by circle time.

For circle time, all the children gathered on the carpet in the block area. Circle time usually began with the children joining hands and singing a song together. After this song, they sat down on the rug and followed the lead of the teacher in singing songs, playing games, or naming colors and shapes as a group. After circle time, the children washed their hands and sat down for snack, choosing their own location at one of the three tables. When children completed their snacks, they went to the cubby area and got ready to go outside to the playground.

Out on the playground, there was a variety of activities from which to choose. There were swings to swing on, structures to climb on, and bikes to ride.

After coming back inside, the children again came to the carpeted area for storytime. During this time, one of the teachers would read aloud from a book, alternately reading and displaying the pictures from the book to the group and frequently asking questions about the story as she read. When the book reading was completed, the children were dismissed from the area to collect their lunchboxes and settle down at one of the three tables for lunch.

After lunch, the children either went back outside or remained in the classroom to play until they were picked up to go home.

## Participant Observation

To develop a complete picture of how young children go about the process of acquiring a second language, I spent several mornings each week for 2 years in this classroom, observing, taking notes, and audiotaping the children's and teachers' interactions. My role in the classroom was that of a participant observer; that is, I was someone who was slightly apart from the everyday life of the classroom but still functioned as a member of the group. Interestingly, the children seemed to accept my role without much question. When I separated myself from the children and concentrated on taking notes, they did not inter-

rupt me and would proceed in their play as if I were not in the room. When I made myself available by putting down my notebook, the children would approach me for help or conversation much as they would the teachers in the classroom.

Occasionally, a child would ask what I was doing when I was taking notes. Leandro was one of the few children who asked me a direct question about my notetaking. I was taking notes during a conversation I was having with Leandro one day, and he asked, "What you are writing?" I said, "I'm writing what you are saying." Then he looked out the window and said, "Police car." Then he looked at me and said, "You write police car?" I said, "Yes." This type of direct questioning was quite unusual, however. On the whole, I found that it was very easy to move back and forth between interactions with the children and teachers (participant) and notetaking (observer) without jeopardizing either role. By being a participant, I came to know all of the children and the teachers; by being an observer, I was able to record interactions that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. At the end of each day of observation, I typed my notes and my personal interpretations of what I had observed. In this way, I developed an extensive record of the activities in the classroom. Much of the information about and most of the examples of second-language learning in an early childhood educational setting described in this book come from this record.