Issue: Services for Dual Language Learners

Dual language learners (DLLs) often face different struggles than native speakers. For instance, they experience the added stress of trying to learn another language or culture while also studying and completing classwork. Overall, according to an NPR report, DLLs are less likely to graduate college than native speakers. This affects the timing of their entry into the workforce, their ability to be socially mobile and their ability to achieve career advancement. Few colleges offer a comprehensive array of services to support these students as they attend college to earn early childhood education degrees while learning English, putting DLLs at a disadvantage from the very start.

Promising Practices

1. Facilitate "student-to-student" help. According to Ana DeHoyos-O'Connor (email: aoconnor9@alamo.edu), Associate Professor at San Antonio College, their program facilitates student-to-student help. What she means is if there is a native Spanish-speaking student in their program that is also fluent in English, she will connect that student to another student struggling with English or course material. This allows students to develop supportive and collaborative relationships with others in similar situations to increase learning and success.

2. Offer bilingual programs with bilingual student cohorts to create a supportive learning environment that enables students to move through coursework with peers. Support networks and quality course instruction are vital for student success. However, according to the same NPR report above, teachers are often poorly equipped to help DLLs. Offering bilingual courses with staff and peers raises DLL achievement. According to Dr. Fran Langan, the Dean of the School of Professional Studies (email: fran.langan@keystone.edu) at Keystone College (PA), their college began offering a bilingual program in 2014-2015 where cohorts of 8-23 ECE students take courses taught in English and Spanish with other DLLs. This allows them to connect with faculty and increase their professional development. Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) offers a bilingual ECE program with written materials in a student's native language on their West Allis campus, where students speak English and Spanish (or Hmong) with bilingual faculty. Megan Cary (email: carym1@matc.edu), ECE Faculty and Program Coordinator, said MATC programs are built around students, so if students need to be taught primarily in Spanish, then they do so.

3. Explore offering online bilingual courses and degrees that can help create (and increase access to) bilingual cohorts in more rural areas. If DLLs have to take courses in their non-native language, they may struggle and fall behind. Furthermore, according to the previously cited NPR report, the DLL population has grown over the past decade, especially in the rural midwest and south. As a result, students in those areas have a greater need for courses than what is currently offered, especially online. Providing online courses in these rural areas, using a wider catchment area for students to participate, helps build sufficient communities of bilingual students to populate courses and can increase access to DLL students and/or those students who cannot attend college onsite during traditional hours.

4. Central New Mexico, according to communication with faculty, also offers scholarships to undocumented students in the state that can prove their New Mexico residency. This allows them to pay for tuition at the in-state rate, instead of the required out-of-state tuition based on their undocumented status. Contact ecmeprogram@cnm.edu for more information.

5. Another resource that could be beneficial for DLLs to offer comes from the I-BEST model implemented first in Washington State. I-BEST stands for Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training, and it pairs English-as-a-Second Language instructors with course instructors in the classroom to help students develop developmental and course-specific skills. The I-BEST program first started with teaching basic developmental skills such as math and reading, but also is used for helping English language learners succeed in college. According to communication with faculty at Central New Mexico (contact ecmeprogram@cnm.edu for more information), they offer ESL courses following the I-BEST model, where English faculty come to the ECE courses and teach English to dual language learners. This allows students to learn English that is geared toward ECE topics and comprehension.

If you know of any promising strategies to address this barrier and would like to share, please contact Judy Leinbach at judyl@teachecnationalcenter.org.