Dual Language Learning Institute Webcast Part 6 - Cognitive Development

Sharon Yandian: Okay, last but not least, the final school readiness concept we are going to cover today is cognition and general knowledge. We know that language development involves much more than simply learning to speak.

As children begin to acquire their home language, perhaps prior to entering your program, some of their conceptual knowledge is also being built. During the birth to five period, young children develop a wide range of important conceptual skills. Some of these include categorization -- for example, children are able to identify apples, bananas and oranges as examples of fruits, or are able to recognize the differences between children and adults.

Classification: children are able to distinguish between big and small items or are able to group items by two or more attributes, such as, "This bowl is red and plastic. That bowl is green and made of glass. "Number operations: children are able to count the items in a group, or able to add small quantities together to obtain the correct sum. Spatial relationships: children are able to indicate objects that are above, below, or beside another object, or are able to indicate that an object is to the left of another object.

Based on these concepts, we know that children must use what they already know to build their conceptual knowledge and cognitive development on the way to English acquisition. In this case, it is important to understand that knowledge transfers. Once the child understands a concept, the same concepts can then readily be transferred to a second language after the child has developed the vocabulary and grammatical abilities in that language.

So, let's look back at categorization, an important skill. For instance, if a child understands that there are many types of fruit, then they will just need to learn the names for different fruits in English, not the concept of "fruit" itself. The same would be true for colors. Again, this is also why it is so important for us to try to learn from the parents or previous teachers what the child already knows in the home language and build on that in the classroom. Carol, how would you work on developing concept knowledge in your program?

Carol: Well, a number of examples come to mind. We know children need to be stimulated and challenged, so I used to place meaningful open-ended tools all around the classroom. These tools would include such items as a piece of colorful cloth or clothing from different cultures, familiar empty food boxes and different-shaped blocks. It's important to have open-ended materials for children to explore and use in ways they imagine.

When children are surrounded by items and sounds they are familiar with, this will enrich their experiences and they will begin conversing and exploring language and literacy intentionally. One child brought a piece of colorful cloth to me and asked to put her baby on her back for her. I tied the cloth around her waist so she could carry her baby on her back like her grandmother. Another child might use this cloth to cover her head, and yet another as a baby blanket.

These are tools you use to engage children in developing language skills such as classifying things like colors and counting numbers. And when the idea comes from the child themselves, the basis for extended conversation is there. In the past, I have placed colors in various patterns on the floor, and asked children to write down what the pattern is. That way, they are associating the color with a particular configuration and not just concentrating on the word.

I also always try to associate colors with real objects. For example, red, yellow and green are all associated with a traffic light. I also have asked parents and other staff in our program that speak the numerous languages of the children to come into my classroom to work with some of the children on math manipulative games and sequencing.

I met with them to explain what we were doing around numbers and operations, and told them that what was most important was that the children got the concepts of sequencing to ten and beyond as well as the one-to-one correspondence. I gave them examples as to what they could do. I felt very confident that the English words would come, but I wanted to use the children's language as a resource to help them more easily master the math concepts.

I knew that the other work we were doing would be reinforced by the activities in their own language, so as you can see, there are many methods you could use to enhance cognitive development in dual language learners that spans

across all school readiness concept areas. Just use your imagination and remember, when you include a child's culture and home language tools in the classroom, it helps enhance their overall development and learning.

Sharon: Thanks, Carol. Well, that's all the time we have for today. I certainly want to thank Carol Bellamy for those great practical applications. I'm sure our viewers can't wait to try some of those activities themselves. If you have any questions after viewing this webcast, you may send them to the email address you see on your screen now: ohswebcast@esi-dc.com, and a member of the Office of Head Start staff will answer them.

In addition, this webcast can be accessed on demand at the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, or the ECLKC, until the National Dual Language Learners Institute on October 28th, 2008. For those of you attending the Institute, we look forward to your participation. We also encourage you to keep visiting the ECLKC for additional information concerning dual language learners and their families.

[Music] Thank you again for taking the time to be with us today for this web cast. Most of all, thank you for the time you take every single day to make a difference in the lives of the children and families we serve in Head Start.--->
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