

Dual Language Learners and the CLASS™ Measure

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Introduction

The population of dual language learners in the United States is growing rapidly, with much of the growth concentrated in the early years (Gándara, 2010; Hopper, 2012). As these children enroll in early childhood programs and elementary schools, there is a growing need to provide them with high quality, supportive, and stimulating classroom experiences that meet their unique needs. With programs striving to provide the best environments they can for the children they serve, focusing on measuring and improving teacher-child interactions can be an important priority.

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System™ (CLASS™) is a method for understanding, measuring, and improving teacher-child interactions (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008). It includes observational measures of teacher-child interactions and professional development supports to improve these interactions. The CLASS system was developed through years of research conducted at the University of Virginia, and in that time it has been used throughout the United States and abroad in classrooms serving children from 18 months to 18 years of age (e.g., Thomason & La Paro, 2009; Kane & Staiger, 2011). More recently, the CLASS system has been adopted by state and federal programs in the United States for program monitoring and professional development. As use of the CLASS system grows, there is an increasing need to understand how to best use it in classrooms serving dual language learners.

Nearly 20% of school-age children speak a language other than English at home.

The purpose of this brief is to discuss evidence surrounding the use of the CLASS measure in dual-language settings and provide recommendations for using it reliably and validly in these settings. We discuss the challenges facing dual language learners and review CLASS research on this topic.

Finally, we provide specific recommendations for conducting high-quality, trustworthy observations in diverse dual language classrooms.

Dual Language Learners in the United States

Dual language learners include children, born in the United States or abroad, who are acquiring English and another language simultaneously (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005). National data from the 2011 American Community Survey suggest that nearly 20% of school-age children speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Most dual language learners in the US are Spanish speakers: of young children of immigrants from birth to 8-years old, more than half are Mexican, Central American, or South American in origin (Fortuny, Hernandez, & Chaudry, 2010). Others have origins in all parts of the world, including Asia, the Caribbean, and Eastern and Western Europe.

A challenge common to dual language learners is to master new content while learning English and adjusting to the cultural norms of the classroom.

The diversity of dual language learners means that dual language classrooms themselves are very varied. They include classrooms with one or two dual language learners, classrooms that are nearly entirely comprised of dual language learners from the same language background, and classrooms that serve children from multiple language backgrounds. Likewise, instruction can be English-only, mostly a non-English language (usually Spanish), or an evolving mix of Spanish and English as children gain English proficiency (Goldenberg, 2008).

Dual language learners face special challenges as they move through early childhood programs and schools. Studies have shown that they tend to enter school with lower scores on cognitive and language assessments and leave school with lower educational attainment (Beltran, 2011; Gándara, 2010). They are more likely than other students to attend highly segregated, lower-quality schools (Gándara, 2010). At the same time, while dual language learners are a diverse group with highly variable needs, a challenge common to these students is to master new content while

simultaneously learning English and adjusting to the cultural norms of the classroom (Calderón, Slavin, & Sánchez, 2011; Goldenberg, 2008). Meeting the needs of these children can be difficult for teachers, many of whom have not received adequate training in working with dual language learners (Beltran, 2011; Zepeda, Castro, & Cronin, 2011).

Effective Interactions for Dual Language Learners

Educators and researchers have begun to identify specific strategies that teachers can use to enhance the education of dual language learners, such as providing instruction in the child's first language and concentrating initially on vocabulary development (Calderón et al., 2011; Zepeda et al., 2011). However, there is a growing consensus that dual language learners also benefit from the same fundamental experiences as monolingual students, including warm, supportive, and stimulating interactions with their teachers. Looking at social and emotional development, a study of diverse kindergartners found that the quality of teacher-child relationships was more strongly predictive of children's skills than was their status as dual language learners (Howes et al., 2011). In reviewing evidence on teaching dual language learners, one researcher writes, "good instruction for students in general tends to be good instruction for ELLs [English language learners] in particular" (Goldenberg, 2008, p. 17). Similarly, in designing an intervention to help teachers work more effectively with dual language learners, Buysse, Castro, and Peisner-Feinberg (2010) note that high-quality instruction, including effective teacher-student interactions, is critical for all children, especially those learning English as a second language.

Research specific to the CLASS measure bears this out. Studies have shown that effective interactions measured by the CLASS tool are important for monolingual and dual language learners alike.

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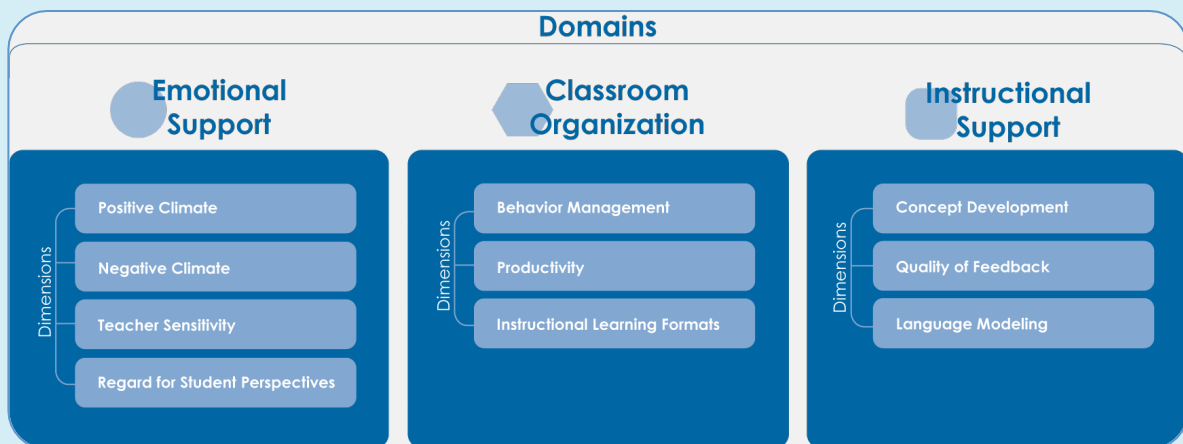
The CLASS Measure

The CLASS measure captures effective interactions that are linked to children's academic, socio-emotional, and behavior development. The Pre-K CLASS measure is organized into three broad domains:

Emotional Support: The degree to which interactions are warm, supportive, and sensitive to children's individual capabilities and needs. Studies show that classrooms with higher Emotional Support foster better peer relationships and reduced behavior problems (Mashburn et al., 2008).

Classroom Organization: The degree to which teachers organize time and materials to maximize children's engagement in learning and minimize behavior problems. Higher Classroom Organization is associated with stronger behavioral engagement, less time off-task, and better approaches to learning (Ponitz, Rimm-Kaufman, Grimm, & Curby, 2009; Dominguez, Vitiello, Fuccillo, Greenfield, & Bulotsky-Shearer, 2011).

Instructional Support: The degree to which teachers promote cognitive development by prompting higher-order thinking, stimulating language development, and capitalizing on opportunities to provide feedback. Instructional Support is associated with higher language and math gains (Mashburn et al., 2008).



Can the CLASS measure be used reliably in dual-language classrooms?

In classroom observation, **reliability** refers to the extent to which two observers coding the same classroom at the same time arrive at similar scores. Reliable scores are fundamental; without confidence that scores are reliable, observation results cannot be trusted. For the CLASS measure, researchers look at how often observers assign CLASS codes that are within one point of each other on the seven-point scale. Scores are considered 'reliable' when observers are within one point on 80% or more of their codes.

Researchers were interested in whether CLASS observations can be conducted reliably in dual language classrooms (Vitiello, 2012). They looked at CLASS scores from 2,000 videotapes that had been coded by more than one observer. Overall, there was no significant difference in reliability on the English-only videos versus the videos that used a language other than English, most of which used English and Spanish. This provides preliminary evidence that the CLASS measure can be used reliably to observe interactions in linguistically-diverse classrooms.

Can the CLASS measure be used validly in dual-language classrooms?

Validity refers to the extent to which an observation measures what it is intended to measure when used appropriately. To determine whether the CLASS measure is valid for use in dual language classrooms, a group of researchers examined three things: first, whether the three-domain structure of the CLASS measure applied equally across classrooms with different proportions of dual language learners; second, whether average domain scores were different for dual language versus monolingual classrooms; and third, whether CLASS scores predicted outcomes for dual language learners as well as monolingual English speakers (Downer, López, Hamagami, Pianta, and Howes, 2011).

The CLASS measure works the same way in dual language classrooms as in monolingual English classrooms.

The researchers categorized classrooms into three groups based on the percent of dual language learners, who were largely Spanish speakers: classrooms with no dual language learners, 1 to 50% dual language learners, and more than 50% dual language learners. Results indicated that three-domain structure of the CLASS measure captured interactions well for all three groups. Furthermore, average domain scores did not differ across the three groups. These results indicate that the CLASS measure works the same way in dual language classrooms as in monolingual English classrooms.

The CLASS measure does not specifically assess cultural competence, cultural sensitivity, or teaching strategies specific to dual language learners.

Next, researchers tested whether CLASS scores predicted children's outcomes for dual language as well as monolingual learners (Downer et al., 2011). Results showed that the scores predicted gains in children's language/literacy, math, social competence, and letter naming, as has been reported in previous studies (e.g., Mashburn et al., 2008). Effects were the same for dual language learners and monolingual English speakers.

These results suggest that the CLASS measure can be used validly in dual language classrooms. The structure of the measure held true across diverse groups of classrooms, average scores did not differ across the classrooms, and CLASS scores predicted outcomes for dual language learners and non-dual language learners alike. These findings support the use of the CLASS tool in linguistically diverse preschool settings.

Invalid Uses of the CLASS Measure

While evidence suggests that the CLASS measure can be used validly to observe dual language classrooms, it is important to remember that it is a measure of teacher-student interactions. Although CLASS scores are correlated with teachers' acceptance of diversity (Sanders & Downer, 2012), the CLASS measure does not specifically assess cultural competence, cultural sensitivity, or teaching strategies specific to dual language learners. When programs need to evaluate these important aspects classrooms, they

should supplement CLASS data with information from other sources. The National Association for the Education of Young Children has developed a framework for evaluating cultural competence that may serve as a guideline for early childhood professionals:

(http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/policy/state/QBCC_Tool.pdf).

Beyond Language: Cultural Considerations

Observing in dual language classrooms presents challenges, but the true challenge is to adequately capture interactions among culturally diverse students and teachers. The CLASS measure is rooted in research and theory that are broadly believed to be relevant across many world cultures: that relationships and interactions form the groundwork for social and cognitive development, that learning is socially-mediated, and that inquiry and drawing connections between concepts deepen students' learning (Pianta, 1999). Strong developmental science from the United States and abroad supports these principles (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Relationships and interactions form the groundwork for social and cognitive development.... Learning is socially mediated.

Several studies have validated the CLASS measure with diverse cultural groups, including teachers in Portugal and Finland (Cadima, Leal, & Burchinal, 2010; Pakarinen et al., 2010). The study that validated the CLASS measure for dual language learners discussed above (Downer et al., 2011) also examined how the CLASS measure worked for classrooms serving Latino children. Findings from classrooms with different proportions of Latino children were the same as the findings for different proportions of dual language learners—there were significant links to student outcomes across Latino and non-Latino children (Downer et al., 2011). The CLASS system has also been used in projects in Puerto Rico, Chile, and in Canada with French-speaking teachers. These studies and projects suggest that the CLASS system can be used validly in culturally diverse classrooms.

There are two important issues to be considered, however. First, some cultural groups may value aspects of instruction or have goals for students that are not fully captured by the CLASS measure, such as teachers'

promotion of interdependence among children, or teachers' ability to instill students with a sense of connection to their cultural backgrounds. The CLASS system captures aspects of these interactions (e.g., promoting positive relationships between students, putting new knowledge into a broader context). However, if there are elements of instruction that are considered critical to the cultural group that are not included in the CLASS system, it may be important to supplement CLASS data with information from other sources.

Second, effective interactions may be expressed differently from the indicators and behavioral markers described in the CLASS manual. Cultural norms may discourage eye contact between adults and children, for example, an indication of Positive Climate in the Pre-K CLASS manual (Pianta et al., 2008). The CLASS observation can accommodate some variations in cultural norms, because it is not necessary to observe each behavior described in the manual in order to have adequate evidence of the dimensions (see Recommendation #3 below for more guidance). Where the cultural norms vary substantially, though, it may be necessary to interpret CLASS data with care and consider supplementing CLASS data with additional sources of information.

Research has shown that high quality interactions between teachers and students, as captured by the CLASS observation, support students' cognitive, social, and behavioral growth. It is often helpful to collect multiple types of information about classrooms and teaching, however. The CLASS observation is one strong tool in a toolkit focused on monitoring and professional development for teachers.

A Note on Reliability and Validity

It is important to note that reliability and validity are related to how a measurement tool is used; they are not properties of the tool itself. Even the best observation tool can be used in ways that are inappropriate or that produce poor quality data. Following the guidelines set forth in the recommendations can ensure that observations produce the best possible data.

Recommendations for Reliable, Valid CLASS Observations in Dual Language Classrooms

Based on best practices in conducting observations, as well as research and experience using the CLASS measure, groups conducting observations in dual language settings should consider the following recommendations:

1) Use certified, reliable CLASS observers. Anyone conducting CLASS observations must attend a training and pass the CLASS reliability test. The training teaches specific techniques for using the CLASS observation in diverse settings, and by passing the test, observers prove they can use the CLASS lens reliably.

2) Find a language match. Make sure that observers going into dual language classrooms speak the languages used by the majority of teachers and children. It is important that observers hear and understand what goes on in the classroom to accurately capture interactions. If teachers and children speak multiple languages, try to ensure that the observer speaks the language(s) of instruction, at a minimum.

3) Score what you see. The CLASS measure includes detailed examples of behaviors that demonstrate effective interactions. Observers use those examples to determine what scores to give each classroom. Some of the examples may not fit the cultural norms of the classroom being observed. For example, eye contact is taken as a sign of respect between teachers and children within the CLASS framework, but some cultures discourage eye contact between children and adults. Remember that teachers demonstrate effective interactions in many ways. It is not necessary to see every behavior listed in the CLASS manual to give a classroom a high score. When in doubt, observers should refer to their CLASS manuals for guidance in weighting the behaviors that they do see.

4) Supplement rather than change the tool. The CLASS measure, like other research-based assessments, is backed by evidence showing links to teacher and child outcomes. When you change the CLASS observation to meet your program's particular circumstances, you cannot be sure that the "new" tool will have the same links to outcomes as the original. If you need information about something that the CLASS observation does not address, it is best to supplement it with information from other sources rather than making changes to the CLASS measure itself.

5) Align your observations with professional development. As a final note, make sure that you provide teachers with opportunities to improve their interactions. Giving detailed feedback based on your observations is one place to start. In addition, Teachstone is expanding offerings in Spanish to make sure that more teachers have access to high quality professional development opportunities. More information is available on the Teachstone website, www.teachstone.com.

Dual language learners are an important and growing population in early childhood programs and schools. Because these children face heightened risks to their achievement, it is critical that programs use all of the tools available to improve educational quality and boost outcomes. Focusing on teacher-child interactions by conducting observations and providing feedback to teachers can be an important part of the strategy. Research has demonstrated that the CLASS measure can be used reliably and validly in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms, making it a strong option for programs serving dual language students.

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