

8-2024

Cultivating Cross-Cultural Connections through Language Learning Circles in Early Childhood Programs

Joy Hernandez
Old Dominion University, jrodr027@odu.edu

Abha Gupta
Old Dominion University, agupta@odu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/teachinglearning_fac_pubs



Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), [Early Childhood Education Commons](#), and the [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#)

Original Publication Citation

Hernandez, J., & Gupta, A. (2024). Cultivating cross-cultural connections through language learning circles in early childhood programs. *The Reading Teacher*, 78(3), 207-215. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2358>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Teaching & Learning at ODU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Teaching & Learning Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ODU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@odu.edu.

Cultivating Cross-Cultural Connections through Language Learning Circles in Early Childhood Programs

Joy Hernandez, Abha Gupta

In a world increasingly defined by cultural conflicts and misunderstandings, fostering cross-cultural harmony from an early age is more important than ever. Early exposure to other languages in preschools can promote empathy and inclusivity, preparing children to thrive in a multicultural world, creating a foundation for a more harmonious future.

"By exposing children to diverse perspectives at an early age, we can cultivate a sense of respect and empathy towards others."

During a typical day of the week, while approaching a classroom of 4-year-old children, the primary author hears the children conversing in English and Spanish language. Upon entering the classroom, Ms. Taheerah was seen pointing at the calendar and inquiring about the day's date (all names have been changed to maintain confidentiality). After the children recited the date in English, Ms. Taheerah invited them to do the same in Spanish. She initiated the recitation by saying "Hoy es.... Look at the calendar. Monday is lu..." to which Kadin added "Lunes diez." Jasmine responded to the question "What month are we in?" with "Febrero," while Jared answered "Catorce" to the question "What is fourteen?" Subsequently, Ms. Taheerah pointed to the calendar and uttered the date in Spanish while the children followed along. Afterwards, the children sang the Spanish version of the number song before Alex got up and started gathering some flash cards. These flash cards came in a variety of hues. The children began singing the Spanish and English version of the song "Red is rojo, red is rojo," "Blue azul, blue azul," "Yellow is amarillo, yellow is amarillo," and "Green is verde, green is verde" while Alex pointed to the color flash cards. Children were engaged as they participated in these activities during circle time.

The opening vignette illustrates language learning circle designed to introduce children to the Spanish

language through playful, inviting, and inclusive activities that encourage engagement and collaboration. As children interact, sing, and move together, they are immersed in an environment that fosters language acquisition in a fun and interactive manner (Linnavalli et al., 2018). Language Learning Circles (LLC), also known as language exchange groups or conversation circles, are informal and collaborative environments where individuals gather regularly to practice and learn a new language together, similar to story circles (Flynn, 2024). Emphasizing communication and cultural exchange, participants support each other's language learning journey within a mutually beneficial community setting. LLC provide a platform for interactive engagement, fostering a supportive atmosphere conducive to enhancing language skills (Hohmann & Weikart, 1995; Linnavalli et al., 2018). LLC create a space where children can explore another language through various hands-on activities, songs, and movements (Gonzalez et al., 2019). By actively participating in these engaging exercises, children not only learn new vocabulary and phrases but also develop an appreciation for the culture associated with the language (Paris, 2012). The collaborative nature of the circles encourages peer learning, where children can learn from one another, ask questions, and practice their newly acquired skills in a safe and encouraging environment.

Joy Hernandez is a doctoral candidate at Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, USA; email jrodr027@odu.edu.
Abha Gupta is a Ph.D. Professor/Graduate Program Director of Reading Education, Language and Literacy Education, Department of Teaching and Learning, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, USA; email agupta@odu.edu.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

A Diverse Early Childhood Center: Demographic Context

These vignettes are based on observations at an early childhood center located in the southeastern United States. The center includes six classrooms designed to accommodate up to 64 children. With a focus on providing personalized attention, the center maintains a low student-teacher ratio. For children aged between 2 and 35 months, the ratio is five students to one teacher, with an additional assistant teacher. For ages three to five, the ratio is 10 students to one teacher, accompanied by a teacher assistant. The center celebrates diversity, with its student body representing a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Black, Hispanic, White, and Asian. This diversity is also reflected in the teaching staff, with educators and paraprofessionals hailing from various ethnic and racial groups, such as White, Black, and Asian. The program is meticulously tailored to meet the unique needs of early childhood learners. Age-appropriate learning materials and activities are carefully curated to foster comprehensive development across multiple domains, including cognitive, physical, social-emotional, and language development (Gonzalez et al., 2019; Miendlarzewska & Trost, 2014; Varadi, 2022). This holistic approach ensures that each child receives the necessary support and stimulation to thrive during these formative years.

According to the most recent data from the United States Census Bureau (2019), there are approximately 44.36 million Spanish speakers in the country, representing 13.4% of the total population aged five and older. This figure includes both individuals who speak Spanish exclusively at home and those who speak it in addition to English or other languages. Notably, among children aged 5 to 17, Spanish is the second most commonly spoken language after English. Of the approximately 65.7 million children in this age group, a substantial 26.8% (17.6 million) speak Spanish at home. This means that roughly one in four children in the USA grow up in households where Spanish is the primary language spoken. The prevalence of Spanish speakers, particularly among the younger generation, underscores the language's significance in American society. As the United States continues to become increasingly diverse, fostering cross-cultural understanding and communication will be crucial for building a more inclusive and harmonious nation.

PAUSE AND PONDER

- How might exposure to a new language at an early age impact children's overall cognitive and social development?
- What strategies can teachers use to introduce another language in a way that captivates and engages young learners?
- In what ways can incorporating songs, games, and stories in another language foster a positive learning environment?

Insider Observations and Bias Mitigation

To gain in-depth insights into the Child Development Center, the primary author, who served as the Center's Director, conducted direct classroom observations by participation in the activities. This insider approach leveraged the author's deep understanding of the setting, providing valuable perspectives and rich data. However, recognizing the potential for observer bias due to the Director's presence potentially influencing teacher and student behavior, mitigating strategies were implemented. The author consciously strived for objectivity throughout the observation process and actively sought diverse perspectives to minimize bias. Regular discussions were held with teachers to gather their feedback, ensuring a comprehensive and balanced view of the classroom dynamics. By acknowledging potential biases and taking measures to counteract them, such as maintaining objectivity and seeking multiple viewpoints, the author aimed to uphold the integrity of the observations and the insights derived from them. Through this rigorous approach, the author sought to navigate the challenges of observer bias while capitalizing on the unique insider perspective afforded by the Director role. By implementing strategies to mitigate bias and maintain objectivity, the observations aimed to provide a well-rounded and reliable understanding of the Child Development Center's classrooms.

Language Learning Circles (LLC)

To develop effective LLC that promote young children's language learning, cultural awareness, and global understanding, we considered the following questions and ensured that language practice is both meaningful and enriching for enhancing linguistic and cultural competence.

1. What goal(s) beyond the classroom can children aim to accomplish?
2. What academic and cultural knowledge can be leveraged in working on the goals?
3. What foundational language and literacy skills can be developed with these goals?
4. How does the goal inspire appreciation, satisfaction, playfulness, or pride?

Driven by these guiding questions, the program developed LLC that promote meaningful connections between language and literacy and other areas, striving towards an objective that extends beyond the classroom and has real-world impact.

LLCs are small groups of children who come together to learn and practice a new language (Adams, 2017; Otto, 2009). They are designed to foster a friendly, cooperative setting where participants can improve their language abilities in a fun and interesting way. Participants in LLC usually alternate leading activities or discussions pertaining to the language being learned. This can include activities that expose learners to the practices and traditions of the language they are learning, such as vocabulary development, grammar practice, speaking and listening practice, and cultural activities (Weatherhead, 2008). LLC can be multilingual or centered on language exchange, where participants practice speaking many languages with one another that are frequently structured around a particular language, such as Spanish, French, or Mandarin. LLCs for language acquisition and social engagement LLCs are an effective way to promote language acquisition and social interaction among language learners and provide a supportive and collaborative environment where learners can engage in meaningful language practice and build social connections with other learners Schiller and Lara-Alecio (2004). LLC provide an opportunity to learn, practice and sharpen language abilities while interacting with peers in a risk-free playful setting. (Clapper, 2010) found creating a safe learning environment encourages learners to take risks and make mistakes. The selection of activities and themes for the language learning center is made by the teacher based on the learning objectives and goals. This decision is influenced by the need to meet the required standards of learning and development, ultimately enhancing language skills and learning.

Teachers play a crucial role in advancing cultural and linguistic responsiveness in schools. Researchers (Villegas & Lucas, 2007) underscore the ethical responsibility of teachers to contribute to creating equitable learning environments for all students. To fulfill this obligation, teachers are encouraged to view themselves as part of a collective community of educators working towards inclusivity.

Teaching Spanish with Songs, Finger Plays and Games

According to Hohmann and Weikart (1995), children learn best when actively participating in enjoyable activities. Providing access to games, songs, and finger plays

encourages engagement. Introducing Spanish at a young age, while the brain and language abilities are still developing, facilitates easier learning and understanding. During the preschool years, children actively participate in developing their oral and receptive language skills through music (Linnavalli et al., 2018). They continue exploring sounds, playing with their voices, and realizing that sounds carry meaning. Children use language to communicate ideas, desires, and demands. However, at times, they attempt to express more than their vocabulary allows, extending words to create new meanings (Snow et al., 1998). For English language learners, Miller et al. (2000) recommend a joyful read-aloud book featuring songs in English with an easy-to-follow chorus and catchy verses, making it a favorite among children who quickly catch on. The book's diverse representation of children from various regions, dressed in native attire, emphasizes the universality of the message: regardless of backgrounds, appearances, or family structures, children are all the same at heart.

Singing the Cleanup Song "Vamos a Recojer"

After observing the 4-year-olds preschool classroom for a week to find out the children's interests, the primary author noticed the children consistently refused to clean up when asked by the teacher. Seeking to address this issue, the author decided to help the teacher by introducing a related activity in Spanish to the class in an engaging way. On the following Monday morning before lunch during open centers children were involved in different centers, the author gathered them around. "Have any of you heard someone speak Spanish before?" she asked. The question piqued their interest, and they eagerly shared their experiences.

"I hear Dora say Spanish," Kadin responded.

"Oh, you watch Dora, and you hear her speak Spanish," the author acknowledged. "What Spanish words have you heard?"

"I hear 'vamos,'" Jarred offered.

"She says 'hola,'" Brennen chimed in.

"And, and 'brinca,'" Alex added.

"Do you know what the word 'vamos' means?" the author asked. Seeing their inquisitive looks, she explained, "It has many meanings depending on how you use it. It could mean 'let's go' or 'come on.'"

"Hola is..." she prompted, and the children excitedly yelled, "Hello!"

"What does 'brinca' mean?" the author continued.

"That means to jump," Alex responded, recalling the familiar word.

As lunchtime approached, the children needed to clean up and get ready. Recognizing the opportunity to address their reluctance to clean, the author seized the teachable

moment, having captured the children's interest with the Spanish vocabulary. She began clapping her hands and singing a cleanup song in Spanish, inviting the children to join in. The lyrics of the song went like this, "*Vamos a recoger , vamos a recoger , vamos , vamos , vamos , vamos a recoger.*" the author explained to them that it means, "Let us cleanup, let us cleanup, let us, let us, let us, let us, let us cleanup." The catchy rhythm and Spanish lyrics immediately captivated the children. They loved the song, dancing and singing along as they tidied up the classroom. The simple act of cleaning up became an engaging language learning experience, with the children joyfully participating and absorbing the Spanish phrases. The author skillfully integrated the Spanish lesson into the daily routine, transforming a potentially mundane task into a fun and educational activity. By introducing the cleanup song in Spanish, she reinforced the vocabulary they had just learned while encouraging active participation and movement. The children's enthusiasm and willingness to engage with the Spanish song and dance created a lively, interactive learning environment. As they cleaned up, they were unknowingly practicing the target language, associating the words with their actions and forming connections that would aid in language acquisition.

Collaborative Learning: Peer Interaction in Language Acquisition

The introduction of the Spanish cleanup song proved to be an instant hit among the children. Whenever the teacher requested them to clean up, they enthusiastically started singing the catchy tune, clapping their hands, and chanting, "*Vamos a recoger , vamos a recoger , vamos , vamos , vamos , vamos a recoger.*" Due to the mixed-age grouping of the children in the morning and afternoon sessions, the song quickly spread throughout the preschool within days of its introduction. Every child could be heard singing the Spanish lyrics, eagerly participating in the cleanup routine by clapping and singing along.

The song's popularity extended beyond the classroom walls as it proved to be a turning point in engaging young children who previously refused to tidy up. The catchy tune quickly became a hit, spreading from the initial classroom to others within the preschool and even reaching the homes of parents. Parents, intrigued by the new tune their children were singing, approached the author inquiring about its meaning. In response, the author provided them with a copy of the lyrics and a translation, fostering a connection between the school's language learning efforts and the home environment. The song became a unifying experience, transcending age groups and bridging the gap

between school and home. It not only made the cleanup process more enjoyable for the children but also introduced them to new vocabulary and language patterns in a natural, organic, and engaging way.

The song selection strategy aimed to introduce students to tunes in both English and Spanish, with similar melodies used for each language version. This approach empowered students to choose the language they preferred for singing, fostering a sense of autonomy, and participation. Songs can be effective tools for teaching new skills due to their ability to engage learners emotionally, enhance memorization through rhythm and repetition, and create an enjoyable and interactive learning experience (Bolduc, 2008; Rosenbusch, 1983). The combination of melody and lyrics makes complex concepts more accessible and enjoyable, fostering a dynamic and effective educational environment.

Furthermore, incorporating hand motions and gross motor actions alongside the songs increases their effectiveness as teaching tools. The multisensory approach, combining auditory, visual, and kinesthetic elements, reinforces learning and creates a more immersive and memorable experience for young learners (Gonzalez et al., 2019). By introducing the Spanish cleanup song, the educators not only addressed the initial challenge of engaging children in the cleanup process but also provided a culturally enriching language learning experience. The song's popularity among students and parents alike demonstrated its effectiveness in promoting language acquisition, cultural appreciation, and a love for learning through music and movement (Figure 1).

Younger children react positively to the repetition and melody of nursery rhymes and songs, even when they don't understand the words (Levine & Munsch, 2020).

Figure 1
Landon, Jayden and Stephen are singing "Vamos a Recoger" while they cleanup



Table 1
Mi Escuelita—My Small School

Spanish	English	Gesture/movement
Mi Escuelita	My Small School	
Mi escuela, mi escuela	My small school, my small school	Dance sitting down or standing up
yo la quiero con amor	I love you with all my love.	Hug yourself. Arms crossed over chest is sign for love
porque en ella, porque en ella	because in you, because in you	Point to your temple; Point forward
es que aprendo mi lección	is where I learn my lesson.	Indicate self with both thumbs. Then open both hands like a book
Por la mañana temprano, lo primero que yo hago	Early in the morning the first thing I do	Indicate your watch with your index finger in time to the music
saludar a mi maestra	is to greet my teacher.	Wave one of your hands
y despues a mi trabajo	and start my work	Then open both hands like a book

Building on this, the author continued assisting the teacher and children in the 4-year-old classroom by reinforcing the “Vamos a Recoger” cleanup song. The classroom teacher became so enthusiastic about the song that she seamlessly integrated it into the daily cleanup routine. As the children joyfully sang along, tidying up transformed from a chore into an engaging, language-rich experience.

Building on the success of the first Spanish song, the primary author and teacher introduced another tune, “Mi Escuelita” (My Small School), to further immerse the children in the language (Table 1). The gradual integration of Spanish songs into the classroom routine created a natural and enjoyable environment for language learning. The repetition and melodies captivated the children, fostering their interest and participation, even as they were exposed to new vocabulary and linguistic structures.

By leveraging the power of music and the children’s inherent receptiveness to songs, the author and teacher were able to introduce Spanish in a way that felt seamless and organic, rather than forced or imposed. This approach not only made language learning more accessible but also cultivated a positive association with the Spanish language, setting the stage for further exploration and cultural appreciation.

“Mi Escuelita” (My Small School) Song

During the introduction of the “Mi Escuelita” (My Small School) song, the author utilized a bilingual approach. She initially spoke the song’s sentences in Spanish, providing corresponding English translations concurrently. This concurrent translation at the introductory level offered immediate clarification, allowing students to grasp the context in which

words and phrases were used. It also helped students unfamiliar with Spanish comprehend the task. Hearing words in context provided a way to expand their vocabulary and encourage active participation. The purpose was twofold: to alleviate frustration for those unfamiliar with the language and to actively engage all students by providing real-time translations, thereby encouraging their participation. Although research shows that long-term use of participants’ primary language in the form of concurrent translation does not always facilitate second language vocabulary acquisition, it served as a valuable initial scaffold.

After the introduction, children exhibited inquisitive behavior and posed various inquiries concerning the meaning of certain words. For example, Ethan exclaimed, “My school is big, not small!” “I know that, but if you compare it to your brother’s elementary school it is small,” the author answered. “I love you, what! That is funny,” expressed Jarred. “Do you like coming to school?” The author asked him. “Yea,” he answered. “Well, some children like coming to school and they love their school because of that,” the author added. “Oh, ok,” Jarred replied. “In the morning I get up and brush my teeth first,” said Ayanna as a personal anecdote regarding her morning routine. The author validated her response but also provided an explanation that upon arrival at school, greeting the teacher is an essential social ritual. “Yes, I am sure. But when you come to school you greet your teacher, right,” the author explained. “OK,” she answered.

The author slowly began to sing the song with the accompanying finger play movements (see Table 1). The children and the classroom teacher repeated the words and followed along with the finger play. They became so engaged that they repeated the song and finger play six

Figure 2
Alyssa, Maia, Christian and Ethan singing “Mi Escuelita” finger play



times without a break. The author reassured them of continued daily visits to reinforce the song and movements until they learned it thoroughly (Figure 2).

To encourage practice at home, the author provided parents with a copy of the song and its translated version. Parents seemed excited about this opportunity. The author recommended practicing the song alone before involving their child, as it took the class longer to learn “Mi Escuelita” due to its diverse vocabulary and accompanying finger play. Even though it seemed challenging, the children still seemed to enjoy the song. “Can you sing it again and again and again?” asked Jayden. “Please, please, please,” added Jasmine. The author obliged, singing the song repeatedly with the finger play as long as the children requested, fostering an engaging and interactive language learning experience.

Game “El Gato y El Raton”

This week, the author introduced a game she had played in elementary school, sharing with the 4-year-old class, “I am going to teach you a game in Spanish.” The children’s excitement was palpable as they jumped up and down, with Brennen yelling, “Yeah, yeah, yeah,” and Ethan adding, “Oh yeah.” Before heading outside to the playground, the author explained the game’s rules and vocabulary.

El Gato y el Ratón	The Cat and Mouse (translation)
Aquí viene el gato y el ratón,	Here comes the cat and mouse
a darle combate al tiburón.	to combat the shark.

Ratón, que te cojo,	Mouse, I am going to get you
que te cojí,	I caught you,
detrás de la mata de ajonjolí.	Behind the sesame plant.

Once on the playground, she instructed the children to hold hands and skip in a circle while singing a song repeatedly. One child (the mouse) was placed inside the circle, while another (the cat) remained outside, attempting to break in and tag the mouse. The author emphasized the importance of holding hands tightly to prevent the cat from sneaking inside and touching the mouse. However, she also explained that once the cat entered the circle, the mouse could be aided by the other children to escape outside. “You’ve got to be careful because the cat can try to sneak out of the circle to catch the mouse,” she warned, adding, “The cat is allowed to force his way in as long as he does not hit or hurt anyone.” Encouraging active participation, the author advised the children to shout instructions and warnings to the mouse, cautioning, “Hold tight and be careful, the cat can run into your holding hands so hard it could break in.”

The game, known as “El Gato y El Ratón” (The Cat and the Mouse), sparked joy and engagement among the children, with lots of running, giggling, singing, and dancing. “Oh my, this is funny,” Jasmine expressed, while Kadin added, “This is a great game.” Once the mouse was caught, the author explained, “We can pick two more to play cat and mouse,” allowing for continuous play and participation.

The children thoroughly enjoyed the Spanish game, which reinforced traditional language instruction with creative learning techniques like games, helping to speed up the educational process and make it more enjoyable (Oxford et al., 1990).

To support their child’s learning at home in a fun and easy way, parents were provided handouts explaining the meaning of the words in the song and instructions on how to play the game. These handouts helped ensure consistent teaching methods and resources across home and preschool settings, allowing children to practice and master the songs and games, and better prepare for Spanish-related activities in preschool.

Singing songs, accompanied by finger plays, hand movements, and body movements, are essential components of music and singing activities in early childhood programs. These activities help develop a variety of skills in young children, including fine motor skills, language skills, and memory. While finger plays involve using one’s fingers and hands to act out the words of songs or rhymes,

movement and gestures encompass a broader range of physical expressions, such as using hands and arms to communicate, dancing, or even nodding in agreement. Finger plays are a subset of movement and gestures, but not all movement and gestures are finger plays. Here are some of the skills that can be targeted with these methods in early childhood programs:

	Skills and educational target learning pursuits of LLC
1	<i>Gross motor skills:</i> Body movement activities, such as dancing and moving to the beat of the music, help develop gross motor skills, which are important for physical coordination. These activities require children to use their large muscle groups and develop their balance, coordination, and spatial awareness (Gonzalez et al., 2019)
2	<i>Fine motor skills:</i> Finger play and hand movement activities help develop fine motor skills, which are important for tasks such as writing, drawing, and manipulating small objects. These activities require children to use their fingers and hands in precise and coordinated ways, which can strengthen their hand-eye coordination and dexterity (Gonzalez et al., 2019)
3	<i>Memory and recall:</i> Singing songs and performing finger plays and hand movements require children to remember and recall specific sequences of words and actions. This can help develop their memory skills and their ability to focus and concentrate on specific tasks (Miendlarzewska & Trost, 2014)
4	<i>Language skills:</i> Singing songs and reciting finger plays can help develop language skills, including vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension. These activities expose children to new words and concepts, and they can help children learn to use language in a creative and expressive way (Hohmann & Weikart, 1995; Linnavalli et al., 2018)
5	<i>Social and emotional skills:</i> Singing and moving together with peers can help children develop social and emotional skills, such as developing relationships, cooperation, empathy, and self-regulation. These activities can help children learn to work together, take turns, and express themselves in a safe and supportive environment (Varadi, 2022).

Skills and educational target learning pursuits of LLC

6	<i>Culturally Responsive Learning:</i> Using another language promotes cultural awareness and appreciation, including exposure to diverse perspectives, beliefs, and traditions (Gay, 2000; Django Paris, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995)
7	<i>Strengthening School-Home Connection:</i> Sharing songs with parents via handouts not only strengthened the relationship with families and connected school learning with home, but also ensured consistent messaging to children, as parents and teachers were equipped with the same information (Ruokonen et al., 2021)

Cultivating Linguistic Skills, Cultural Appreciation, and Social Harmony through Playful Spanish Immersion

Circling back to the questions posed earlier regarding the development of effective Language Learning Circles, the program's implementation revealed meaningful goals that extended far beyond the classroom walls. Through playful interactions, children not only acquired foundational language and literacy skills in Spanish, but also cultivated a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity. The lively songs, games, and activities ignited a sense of pride and satisfaction as they enthusiastically embraced this new linguistic journey. Moreover, the circles leveraged academic concepts like vocabulary and grammar while authentically exploring the rich cultural traditions and perspectives intrinsically woven into the Spanish language. Ultimately, these LLCs planted seeds of global understanding, equipping children with the empathy and openness to navigate an increasingly interconnected world.

As the rich tapestry of American society becomes increasingly interwoven with Spanish language and culture, equipping our children with exposure to global languages unlocks a boundless world of opportunities. By introducing Spanish language within the classroom, we cultivate far more than just awareness of a language, we foster a harmonious symphony of positive growth across the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive domains for the next generation (Gonzalez et al., 2019; Miendlarzewska & Trost, 2014; Varadi, 2022). Exposure to multiculturalism serves as a catalyst for empathy and cross-cultural understanding, arming children with the ability to navigate a diverse landscape of perspectives (Pagani & Robustelli, 2011). LLCs become bridges spanning cultures, dismantling stereotypes and

forging respect through authentic shared experiences. These early encounters with Spanish weave an intricate tapestry of inclusivity, paving the path towards peaceful coexistence in a world too often threatened by division and conflicts rooted in misunderstanding. By embracing a new language, we transcend mere vocabulary lessons; instead, we invest in a future where mutual understanding, inclusivity, and respect resonate as the universal lingua franca of our shared human experience.

Funding Information

The project was not funded.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors of this research paper declare that they have no conflicts of interest that could influence the results or interpretation of their research. All data used in this study was obtained with appropriate permissions and in accordance with ethical guidelines. Specifically, the authors have no financial or personal relationships with individuals or organizations that could potentially bias their work. Additionally, the authors have received no funding from any sources that could be perceived as influencing their research.

Key Contributions

- **Introduction to Language Learning Circles:** The article highlights the concept of Language Learning Circles (LLC) as a collaborative and inclusive environment where children can learn and practice a new language through playful activities.
- **Holistic Language Development:** The article emphasizes that LLC creates a space for children to explore another language through hands-on activities, songs, and movements, not only learning new vocabulary and phrases but also developing an appreciation for the culture associated with the language.
- **Incorporation of Music Education:** Music is an integral part of the center's curriculum, with activities designed to foster linguistic skills, social-emotional development, and cognitive growth. The use of music in early childhood education has been shown to have numerous benefits, including improved memory, language skills, and emotional intelligence.

Data Availability Statement

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGPT & Claude in order to format references in APA

TAKE ACTION!

Practical Implications for Early Childhood Educators (with a focus on exposure to cultures represented by students in the classroom):

1. **Create a Supportive Atmosphere:** Foster a classroom environment that encourages active participation and keeps students engaged. Start the day with an interactive greeting in the target language, such as "Sabah al-khair" in Arabic for "Good Morning" using concurrent translation and praise students for their efforts and progress.
2. **Encourage Inquisitive Behavior:** Ask students questions about the meanings of words or phrases to stimulate curiosity and engagement. Show a picture of a common object and ask, "How do we say 'apple' in Chinese?" to encourage thinking and participation.
3. **Validate Student Responses and Provide Explanations:** Offer personalized feedback and clear explanations to help students connect with the material. If a student says "chat [shat]" for "cat" in French, respond with, "Yes, 'chat' means cat in French. Great job!"
4. **Integrate Music and Songs:** Enhance engagement and language acquisition by incorporating songs and music into lessons. For example, teach a popular children's song like "La Vaca Lola" in Spanish, using actions and visuals to reinforce the lyrics.
5. **Bridge the Gap Between School and Home:** Connect classroom learning with students' home environments, involving families in the process.
6. **Leverage Community Resources:** Utilize local resources and involve family members to enrich the cultural and language learning experience.

style, to improve readability and language and to check for grammar, syntax, and organization. The technology was used with human oversight and control. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

REFERENCES

- Adams, K. (2017). English learning circles, a path to learner independence. *British Council*. <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/professional-development/teachers/planning-lessons-and-courses/articles/english-learning-circles>
- Bolduc, J. (2008). The effects of music instruction on emergent literacy capacities among preschool children: A literature review. *Early Childhood Research & Practice (ECRP)*, 10(1), 1–5.
- Clapper, T. (2010). Creating the safe learning environment. *PAILAL*, 3, 1–6.

- Flynn, E. E. (2024). Supporting language diversities through story circles. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X231221367>
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.
- Gonzalez, S. L., Alvarez, V., & Nelson, E. L. (2019). Do gross and fine motor skills differentially contribute to language outcomes? A systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 2670. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02670>
- Hohmann, M., & Weikart, D. P. (1995). *Educating young children: Active learning practices for preschool and child care programs*. High/Scope Educational Research Foundation.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32, 465–491.
- Levine, L. E., & Munsch, J. (2020). *Child development from infancy to adolescence: An active learning approach* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Linnavalli, T., Putkinen, V., Lipsanen, J., Huotilainen, M., & Tervaniemi, M. (2018). Music playschool enhances children's linguistic skills. *Scientific Reports*, 8(1), 8767. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-018-27126-5>
- Miendlarzewska, E. A., & Trost, W. J. (2014). How musical training affects cognitive development: Rhythm, reward and other modulating variables. *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, 7, 279. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnins.2013.00279>
- Miller, J. P., Greene, S. M., & Meisel, P. (2000). *We all sing with the same voice*. Harper Collins.
- Otto, B. W. (2009). *Language development in early childhood education*. Merrill Publishing Company.
- Oxford, R., Crookall, D., Cohen, A., Lavine, R., Nyikos, M., & Sutter, W. (1990). Strategy training for language learners: Six situational case studies and a training model. *Foreign Language Annals*, 23(3), 197–216.
- Pagani, C., & Robustelli, F. (2011). *Young people, multiculturalism, and educational interventions for the development of empathy* (pp. 247–261). UNESCO. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93–97. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12441244>
- Rosenbusch, M. H. (1983). Kindergarteners and parents: Learning Spanish together. *Hispania*, 66(2), 261–265. <https://doi.org/10.2307/341409>
- Ruokonen, I., Tervaniemi, M., & Reunamo, J. (2021). The significance of music in early childhood education and care of toddlers in Finland: An extensive observational study. *Music Education Research*, 23(5), 634–646. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2021.1965564>
- Schiller, P., & Lara-Alecio, R. (2004). *The bilingual book of rhymes, songs, stories and Fingerplays: Over 450 Spanish/English selections*. Bilingual Edition.
- Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. National Academy of Sciences.
- U.S. Census Bureau, (2019). <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2022/acs/acs-50.pdf>, Published in March 2022.
- Varadi, J. (2022). A review of the literature on the relationship of music education to the development of socio-emotional learning. *SAGE Open*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211068501>
- Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. (2007). The culturally responsive teacher. *Educational Leadership*, 64(6), 28–33.
- Weatherhead, Y. (2008). *Creative circle time lessons for the early years*. SAGE Publications.

MORE TO EXPLORE

- **Ebooks—Unite for Literacy** provides free digital access to children's books, narrated in many languages. <https://www.uniteforliteracy.com/>
- **International Children's Digital Library**—With an extensive array of children's books available for free. Users have the option to browse books based on language, age group, and genre preferences. This dual-text format enables early learners to follow the story while simultaneously learning English through reading. <http://en.childrenslibrary.org/>
- **Video Series: "The Polyglot Files"**—This YouTube channel features a variety of videos on language learning techniques, multilingualism, and cultural insights, providing practical advice and inspiring stories from polyglots around the world. <https://www.youtube.com/c/ThePolyglotFiles>
- **Website: "BBC Languages"**—An extensive resource offering free lessons, videos, and interactive tools. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/guide/> This link provides a guide to Languages—20 key phrases and the alphabet. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/index.shtml>
- **Podcast—"The Fluent Show"**—Hosted by Kerstin Cable, this podcast covers a wide range of topics related to language learning, including interviews with polyglots, discussions on cultural immersion, and tips for effective language acquisition. <https://www.fluent.show/>