Why Should a Monolingual English Speaking Reading Teacher Advocate for Biliteracy of English Learners?

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Introduction

English learners (ELs) are one of the fastest growing groups of students in the United States. During the 2011-2012 school year, 4.4 million ELs attended school in the U.S., representing 9.1% of the total K-12 student population (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). This is an increase from the school year 2002-2003 when 8.7% (4.1 million) students were ELs. Currently, eight states have over 10% of students classified as ELs, and 15 states have 6.0 to 9.9% ELs (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). In Illinois, over 200,000 ELs were enrolled in the 2013-2014 school year (Illinois State Board of Education, 2015), comprising 9.4% of the state’s student body (U.S. Department of Education, 2014b). Though ELs are a diverse group who speak a wide variety of languages, by far, more ELs (71%) speak Spanish than any other language (Soto, Hooker, & Batalova, 2015).

Bilingualism or the ability to communicate effectively in two languages in school becomes intermeshed with biliteracy or the “development of literate competencies in two languages” (Bauer & Gort, 2012, p. 202). For some, bilingualism and biliteracy can be divisive, with the question whether bilingualism and biliteracy are valuable assets for ELs (Porras, Ee, & Gándara, 2014). This position leads some to advocate that ELs should simply become immersed in English with no use of the native language in school (Paap & Greenberg, 2013).

In this article, we argue that developing bilingualism and biliteracy leads to invaluable skills for ELs, strengthening the overall language competency in both languages. Although monolingual English-speaking teachers may believe they cannot foster biliteracy in ELs, this is far from the case. After advocating for bilingualism/biliteracy, we provide numerous strategies for monolingual English speaking educators to promote and encourage bilingualism and biliteracy in the classroom.

It Is Easier to Learn Literacy in the Native Language

Allowing ELs to read or write in their native language is sometimes thought to cause confusion or impede their English learning. This belief helped motivate decisions in three states (California’s Prop. 227 in 1998, Arizona’s Prop. 203 in 2000, and Massachusetts’ Question #2 in 2002) to severely limit the use of bilingual and biliterate education for ELs. In fact, ELs need to consolidate their knowledge of their native language instead of directly transferring into learning in a language that they do not understand. Since ELs need five to seven years to master sufficient academic language in their new language to catch up to average grade-level test scores (Thomas & Collier, 2012), they risk
falling behind in both languages and losing out cognitively and academically without proper support in their native language. In reality, ELs learn literacy more easily in their native language and then can transfer these skills over to reading and writing in English (Bialystock, Luk, & Kwan, 2005; Giambo & Szecsi, 2015). Acquiring literacy in the native language provides clear benefits for ELs who are learning English. For example, biliterate ELs have the advantage of using cognates as a strategy when reading for comprehension in either language, particularly when the native language is very similar to English as in the case with Spanish (Yambi, 2010). Cognates are words in two different languages that are similar. With an estimated 25,000 cognates between English and Spanish (cognates.org, 2015), Spanish readers have many hints available when reading English. For instance, ELs who read Spanish would be able to recognize “absolute” in English because the word in Spanish is very similar: absoluto. Likewise, the Spanish word for “abundance” is abundancia. Many more examples offer Spanish readers important clues when reading English.

Although this advantage is particularly notable when the native language is similar to English, even students who speak languages vastly different from English (such as Japanese or Arabic) experience benefits from having acquired literacy in the native language. Giambo and Szecsi (2015) explain, “regarding the development of spelling skills in English, stronger skills in certain aspects of early literacy in the [native language] . . . influence students’ English spelling skill development, regardless of the type of writing system in the [native language].” (p. 58). In other words, having a solid foundation in the native language leads to better understanding of the principles behind writing systems and ultimately better skills when learning English regardless of how different the native language is from English.

No one correct path leads to biliteracy; simultaneous biliteracy (learning to read and write in both languages at the same time) is not better than sequential biliteracy (learning to read and write in one language first and learning in another after) (Crisfield, 2014). Furthermore, the timetable for developing biliteracy varies from child to child. After developing literacy skills in the native language, an EL may take months or years to learn to read and write in English (Crisfield, 2014).

Although having a strong foundation in the native language is helpful in learning English, “native-language literacy is not only a means to an end, it is also an end in itself” (Lyons, 2008, p. 535). That is, the goal of developing strong literacy skills in the native language is not simply to ultimately become proficient in English. Rather, ELs should be able to feel pride in their native language, a notion we will discuss below in more detail.

**With Literacy in the Native Language, Additional Language Literacy Comes Naturally**

When Jim Cummins proposed the Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) model 35 years ago (1981), subsequently substantiated by himself and others (Cummins, 2000; Valentino & Reardon, 2015), he argued that many concepts are common across languages; and once a concept is learned, it can be transferred over to an additional language. In other words, the concept of literacy, that those squiggly lines on the page have meaning and are associated with words also used in oral language, does not need to be taught again for an additional language. Another example is found in mathematics. If students learn how to add using their native language, they will still know how to add using an additional language. The only difference is that they will need to learn the words associated with addition in the additional language. The CUP model is frequently represented using a dual iceberg metaphor. Picture an iceberg below water that, once above water, extends into two
separate peaks. The main iceberg below water represents the CUP between language, while the two separate icebergs above water represent the surface features of the L1 and the L2 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Iceberg Analogy (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2015)

The iceberg image visually encapsulates how ELs who are proficient in their native language will be able to use the skills they already have to their advantage when learning English. Younger ELs who are literate in their native language will recognize “that printed words carry meaning, that words can be combined into sentences and paragraphs, and that certain letters stand for certain sounds” (Haynes, 2007, p. 24). Likewise, older ELs with more experience “will be able to transfer skills such as scanning, selecting important information, predicting what comes next, and visualizing to enhance comprehension” (p. 24). These skills do not need to be retaught; rather, ELs will naturally utilize them when reading and writing in English.

Beeman (2015) explains that learning literacy in the native language “develops the ability to read for understanding. It’s all about meaning. It’s all about comprehension” (p. 1). That is, learning native language literacy builds a foundation that students can then use to learn literacy in English. In fact, at both the elementary and the secondary levels, ELs who received literacy instruction in both their native language and English performed better in English reading than ELs who were taught solely in English (Giambo & Szecsi, 2015). Gerena (2010) further explains, “When students begin to develop literacy in their second language, the process is essentially the same as developing literacy in the first language. They use their previous background knowledge, along with reading strategies . . . to interpret and construct meaning” (p. 56).

Even young children can experience the benefits of literacy before they begin school. One study found that exposing young children to books in their native language fostered stronger pre-literacy skills than those children who were only exposed to books in an additional language (Colorin Colorado, 2007). In fact, even exposing infants to spoken language (such as reading out loud, singing, and listening to music) leads to stronger language proficiency and reading skills when they eventually begin school (Colorin Colorado, 2007). Biliteracy skills not only positively impact children before schooling, but they continue providing advantages in school as detailed in the next section.

More Advantages of Bilingualism and Biliteracy

Bilingualism and biliteracy offer a wide variety of benefits. In the first carefully controlled study of the effect of bilingualism on cognition over 40 years ago, Peal and Lambert (1962) demonstrated that bilingual children outperform monolingual children on both verbal and nonverbal tests of intelligence. More recently, the evidence is clear that emphasis on continued acquisition of both the native language and English actually results in stronger skills in both languages compared with programs that focus on a rapid transition to the exclusive use of English. Both bilingualism and biliteracy are positively correlated with academic achievement (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005). Stronger native language skills allow ELs to catch up and even surpass average grade-level test scores (Thomas & Collier, 2012). This is especially important...
given that ELs tend to lag behind their non-EL classmates academically when they are not permitted to develop bilingualism and biliteracy continuously (Grasperil & Hernandez, 2015).

In addition, bilingual children enjoy stronger metalinguistic awareness and understanding of the structure of language. Metalinguistic awareness encompasses the awareness of words, phonology (organization of sounds), and syntax (word order) (Bialystock, 2004). This greater metalinguistic knowledge consequently makes it easier for bilinguals to learn additional languages beyond their initial two languages (Hoffman & Ytsma, 2004).

This increased understanding of language also helps spark creativity. Bilingual children tend to utilize more divergent (or creative) thinking when it comes to solving problems (Baker, 2006). For instance, when given tasks such as brainstorming unique and unusual uses for objects such as paper clips or cans, bilingual children tend to offer more responses, and their answers are more varied and intricate than their monolingual peers (May, Hill, & Tiakiwai, 2004).

Bilingualism creates increased social competence both inside and outside of school by increasing the access to effective communication with extended family, friends, caregivers, and community members (García, 2009). That is, they often act as a bridge between the family and the school and local community (Baker, 2014). Bilingualism and biliteracy provide children with a multitude of advantages in their school years, and they continue to benefit them after they graduate high school.

Advantages of Bilingualism/Biliteracy After School

Recent studies demonstrate the need for bilingual and biliterate graduates. There is an increasing demand in the workplace for individuals who are proficient in two or more languages (Callahan & Gándara, 2014). However, being bilingual does not necessarily mean the individual is biliterate, which is the deciding factor in higher marketability for graduates (Porras et al., 2014). Employers greatly value the ability to speak and read and write in more than one language. The National Education Association (2013) confirms, “Students who are fluent and literate in more than one language have a competitive edge in today’s job market” (p. 1).

Eleven states, including Illinois, support students’ biliteracy by adding a seal of biliteracy to the diplomas of high school graduates who demonstrate those skills. Five states have a seal “under construction,” and an additional nine states are in the early stages of adding a seal (Seal of Biliteracy, 2015). The seal of biliteracy was created to acknowledge that being bilingual and biliterate is “a source of pride, not shame” (Seal of Biliteracy, 2015). In 2012, the first year the seal was offered in California, around 10,000 students throughout the state received it (Gándara, 2014). Over 40% of these students were once ELs (Olsen & Spiegel-Coleman, 2015), which demonstrates that ELs can go on to have successful academic careers and develop strong literacy skills in both languages. One graduate explained the benefits of the seal by stating, “when I tell someone that I got a 4 or 5 on the Spanish Advanced Placement Exam, they say, ‘That’s nice.’ They don’t really know what that number means or how hard the test was. When I say that I received the Seal of Biliteracy, they understand that I have skills in two languages—even my boss gets it and is impressed” (Egnatz, 2014, p. 1).

Gándara (2014) agrees that employers consider biliteracy a major benefit. In all industries surveyed, the majority of employers stated holders of the seal of biliteracy have an advantage in hiring over those who are monolingual, leading to the hypothesis that this advantage will be amplified as employers become more familiar with the seal of biliteracy. Moreover, in addition to the employment benefits, biliterate students are less likely to drop out of school.
and are more likely to attend college (Callahan & Gándara, 2014). Many ELs come from economically disadvantaged families (Orfield & Lee, 2005), so it is essential to give them every opportunity available to succeed. Being biliterate can have a major impact on your students’ future educational and economic prospects.

**How Can I Help My ELs Become Biliterate If I Do Not Speak, Read, or Write in My Students’ Native Language?**

As children grow older, they gradually perceive the lesser social value of Spanish (Gerena, 2010), frequently because they become increasingly aware of social attitudes that regard languages other than English as unimportant. Ada (2003) explains, “From the moment of beginning school and sometimes even before, Latino children are faced with societal prejudice against their home language” (p. 50). The teacher’s ability to create an environment in which both languages are respected without any sense of negative stigma promotes the best foundation for biliteracy development (Franquiz, 2012). Many ways exist to instill a sense of pride in ELs about their native language. Even if you are not familiar with ELs’ native language, you can still support their bilingualism and biliteracy:

- **Build bilingual classroom libraries.**
  One easy way to promote and value biliteracy is to create classroom libraries that offer books in multiple languages. These books can be of different types, but incorporating bilingual poetry into your library is a good strategy as the texts are brief, and students can practice multiple times (Abraham, 2012). It is important to have students actively engage with the books in the native language in addition to having them read the books by themselves. For example, students can summarize the books in both languages and share them in two languages at school and at home. It is not important if you, the teacher, cannot understand everything the student is writing in the native language. What is important is that the students are actually writing in their native language. This instills a tremendous amount of pride, tells the students that you value their language, and provides an opportunity for the students to practice it (Fu, 2003). In addition, while reading bilingual books, ELs can use translation strategies such as highlighting or circling the unfamiliar words to equivalent words in the English translation (Abraham, 2012).

- **Create bilingual books.**
  Students can create their own dual language books as well, “translating from the new language to the [native language]” (Giambo & Szecsi, 2015, p. 58). This again is placing a value on the native language and allows the student to practice writing in both languages in a meaningful way (Fu, 2003).

- **Create bilingual dictionaries.**
  It is also helpful to have bilingual dictionaries available to ELs so they can look up unfamiliar words and immediately understand them in either language (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2015). This strategy will obviously be more helpful in higher grades, but it is still a useful skill to have. Even in the lower grades, teachers can help the students to develop bilingual dictionary skills.

- **Utilize culturally relevant books and materials.**
  Providing culturally relevant books and other materials is helpful as they help connect ELs to what they are reading. Students should be invited to share issues related to their cultural backgrounds; many times, they will use words from their native language such as quinceañera or Bar Mitzvah. Teachers can ask students questions about books that they read in the native language.
such as “What is the story about?” or “Who is the main character?” (Schwarzer, Haywood, & Lorenzen, 2003). Even if the student reads the book in the native language, to be able to respond to your questions in English is a wonderful example of valuing both languages and is providing experience in both languages.

- **Welcome parents and community members into the classroom.**
  You can work to incorporate parents and community members into the classroom to support student biliteracy (Schwarzer et al., 2003). These individuals can be “great resources for native-language literature, including children’s books, poetry, and stories passed down by oral tradition. Parents and community members can be invited into the classroom to provide support in workshop settings in which students engage in reading aloud, storytelling, shared readings, and the like” (Lyons, 2008, p. 535).

- **Encourage parents to read in L1 at home.**
  Work to strengthen your ELs’ literacy skills by encouraging parents to read to their children at home. Many ELs do not have parents who have the ability to help them read or write in English given that one-third of ELs live in “linguistically isolated” homes in which no family member over the age of 14 speaks English (Escobar, 2013). In these households, the parents may be hesitant to read to their child in the native language as they want their child to become proficient in English and mistakenly believe reading to their child in the native language will hinder this progress (Haynes, 2007; Yambi, 2010). By advising your parents to read to their children in their native language, you are both educating parents on the importance of reading to the child and demonstrating the importance of biliteracy to your students.

- **Advocate for the native language and instill a sense of pride in it.**
  For younger ELs, you might consider reading bilingual picture books aloud. Students feel pride when they see their language on the page next to English. For older children, you can discuss famous pieces of literature written in the native language. Reading stories in their original language is a special skill ELs can enjoy. Moll, Sæz, and Dworin (2001) describe a major advantage of being biliterate as “gaining access to valued cultural resources” (p. 436). After all, not everyone can read Don Quixote in Spanish or Les Misérables in French, and this should be emphasized as a point of pride for ELs. With creative strategies to promote reading and writing in both languages and an emphasis on the value of the native language, ELs can successfully become biliterate.

**Conclusion**

With the number of ELs continuing to grow in the U.S., realizing the potential benefits of bilingualism and biliteracy is crucial for these students. Though much focus tends to be on bilingualism, biliteracy is an important skill for ELs to acquire, in part because it is easier to learn literacy in their native language, but also because it is positively associated with higher education and employment opportunities, and it creates higher cognitive processing and academic success. As a monolingual English-speaking reading teacher, you can foster biliteracy in your ELs. Most importantly, you can help instill a sense of pride in your ELs regarding their native languages and create enthusiasm about bilingualism and biliteracy.


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