

A Celebration of Language: What It Means for ELLs to Have a Bilingual Identity and How Teachers Can Celebrate Their Bilingualism in the Classroom

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Abstract: Fait reviews research on what it means to have a bilingual identity and how factors such as family, the community, and individual motivation shape how students come to value their bilingualism. She also includes several practical ways to build a positive attitude toward bilingualism into classroom instruction by addressing individual motivation, family, and community values. By involving students, families, and members of the school community, the bilingual students have become excited to share their talents as bilingual learners.

As an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, I am constantly reminded of the wealth of linguistic diversity that bilingual learners bring to the classroom each day. However, in the rush of the school day, it can be easy to overlook those differences let alone pause to celebrate them. I was reminded of this when working with a small group of fifth-grade English Language Learners (ELLs) during a language arts class.

“Ms. Fait, why do you only give examples in Spanish?” I paused my mini lesson on the similarities between contractions in English and Spanish. In a brief moment of enthusiasm that my students were inquiring about language structure, I had forgotten that one of the four students spoke Samoan, not Spanish.

“You’re right,” I said, “but I don’t know any Samoan words. Maybe you could teach me.” The next day, to my surprise, that student brought me a list of several words translated from English to Samoan. “My mom and I made this for you,” she said, “to help you learn Samoan.”

Despite the single label of “English Language Learner,” each ELL student may differ significantly from the others in several ways. According to Honigsfeld and Dove (2015), ELLs can be described by their immigration status, prior education in another country, linguistic development in their home language, level of literacy development in their home language, level of English Proficiency, and challenges based on their learning trajectory in school. At the upper elementary level, I have observed ELL students become increasingly aware of these differences in themselves and their native English speaking peers. Often they would avoid talking about their home language or refer to it as “that language.” Being bilingual made them different at a time in which they were just trying to figure out how to fit in.

However, the day my Samoan student shared the list of translated words with my ESL class was different. The other students huddled around and tried to pronounce the new words. They talked about how they would say the words in their home language and wrote them down for me as well. Sharing their hidden talents felt like a celebration of their bilingualism. It was one of the first times I had seen my students truly proud of themselves as bilingual learners.

Research

This interaction led me to wonder about what it means to have a bilingual identity and about the factors shaping how ELLs value their bilingualism. What can I do as a teacher to promote a positive bilingual identity in these students and celebrate their bilingualism?

In her research on the relationship between language and identity, Norton (1997) refers to identity as “how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future” (410). She suggests that teachers of ELLs in particular keep this idea in mind because ELLs are “constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world.” (p. 410). Their bilingualism affects how they interact with their families and communities and how they view their potential success in the future.

Many ELLs born in the United States begin to develop their bilingual identities from an early age. Rodriguez (2015) defines early bilingualism as the simultaneous acquisition and development of two languages during the preschool years. Studying the effects of parental and educator support of early bilingualism, she concluded that three primary factors impact its development: the individual, the family, and society. Individual factors may include a student’s personality, gender, motivation, intellect, and experience with multiple languages. Bilingualism may also be affected by a family’s attitude towards being bilingual and the use of one or two language at home. Additionally, a community’s view of bilingualism may determine available supports for majority and minority languages in school. For example, because English is the majority language in the United States, it’s related to “prestige, power, and success” (p. 190). However, a minority language such as Spanish may be connected to negative perceptions such as poverty or illegal immigration. As a result, a bilingual child may receive conflicting messages about the importance of bilingualism.

By the time students reach high school, familial and societal attitudes may affect how they value their native language academically. In a study of how Latino high school students labeled ELL for seven or more years perceived themselves, Flores, Kleyn & Menken (2015) found that a bilingual identity is both dynamic and complex. Many of the students interviewed identified themselves as being orally bilingual in English and Spanish but felt more confident reading and writing in English. Although they used Spanish and English socially, they preferred English for academic contexts. This was evident in their reported use of both languages in non-academic forms such as texting,

social media, and composing e-mails. They saw it as a means to communicate with family and friends but struggled to find an academic purpose or benefit of bilingualism.

In contrast, Teachers of English to Speakers of Languages (TESOL) (2006) has described bilingualism as being advantageous both cognitively and linguistically. In addition, the organization explains that employers often seek bilingual individuals to help them compete in global markets. However, these benefits may become a reality only if these individuals have developed a high level of proficiency in both languages. TESOL suggests that the best educational environments for bilingual learners are those that encourage the use of primary languages academically and socially. As a result, schools play a powerful role in promoting a positive bilingual identity in English Language Learners.

Classroom Implications

By embedding individual, family, and community factors into classroom instruction, students see their bilingualism as a valued strength within academic settings (Flores, Kleyne & Menken 2015).

Individual Factors of Bilingualism in the Classroom. In order to develop a positive bilingual identity, it is important that students view their primary language as an academic asset. When the native language of ELL students supports instruction, especially if they are literate in their native language, they are better able to comprehend the lesson (TESOL, 2006).

Sumaryono and Ortiz (2004) suggest many simple ways in which teachers can encourage the use of primary languages. For example, during a mini lesson, they could use their students' different languages to practice keywords, which could be written down and shared with their English-speaking peers. In addition to whole group instruction, teachers could also encourage the use of first languages during independent

practice activities. Sumaryono and Ortiz also suggest that students who have strong writing skills in their first language could complete writing projects such as bilingual poems, written responses to math problems, or reflective journals. Later, students could use a bilingual dictionary or online translator to transfer the writing into English. In this way, students are able to see how their bilingual skills can help them complete a rigorous activity. As a result, they will see themselves as successful because of their bilingualism, with such validation and recognition leading to a stronger sense of self.

Family Factors of Bilingualism in the Classroom. Teachers can also promote a positive view of bilingualism at home. Rodriguez (2015) recommends that educators encourage parents to use their native language whenever possible with their children, such as through songs, stories, music, movies, or television shows. Valdés (2011) suggests that parents reach out to extended families in their native countries or interact regularly with local family members (as cited in Rodriguez, 2015).

For older students, bilingualism may play an important role when they act as their family's interpreter. Bilingual children may be called on to help their family fill out medical forms or assist with other paperwork normally associated with adults. Welch (2015) explains that, because of this role, it is important to help students develop practical skills and vocabularies in both languages that will prepare them for real world experiences that they may encounter with their families, which, again, can help bilingual students see the value of their abilities.

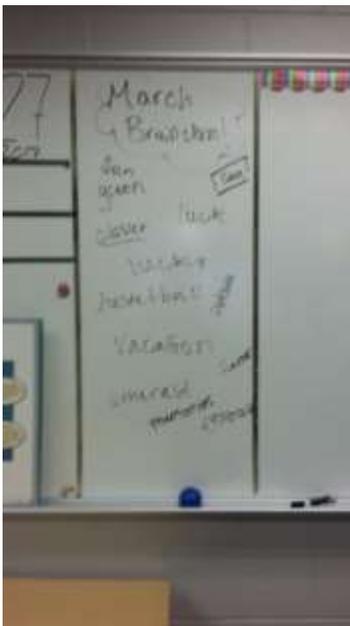
Community Factors of Bilingualism in the Classroom. In addition to individual and family perceptions, educators can also address how students view bilingualism based on community factors. Belpoliti and Fairclough (2016) recommend allowing students to research and explore the contributions of other bilinguals in their community. These could include studying history, education, politics, media, art, language, and traditions. In doing so, students are exposed to careers and leadership opportunities that have

involved bilingualism. Such projects result in deeper understandings of bilingualism within the community and society.

Celebrating Languages

After seeing the excitement in my students to share their languages with each other, I began a monthly project to celebrate the linguistic diversity in our ESL classroom and address the individual, familial, and societal factors that shape their bilingual identities. I created a Celebrating Languages wall with a space for each of the languages represented in our classroom: English, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Samoan, French, and Gujarati.

Celebrating Individual Factors of Bilingualism. At the beginning of each month, my students and I brainstormed a list of simple words in English related to that month. A quick brainstorm on the month of March led to words such as sun, green, clover, luck, lucky, basketball, outside, vacation, soccer, emerald, and memories.



After narrowing the list to four words that could be easily translated into any language, students voted on which should be our word of the month. In March, the word *green* beat out *basketball*, *memories*, and *outside*.



March Vote (left to right): basketball, green, memories, and outside

If students knew how to spell the word, they were able to write it directly onto our celebrating languages wall. Those who knew only how to say the word were encouraged to talk to their parents about it at home. Tech savvy students were able to look up the word using an online translator before posting it to our wall.

No matter which method they used, the end result was a piece of our classroom that showcased them as bilingual learners. Each month brought a similar excitement as students buzzed about what the word of the month would be and how to say that word in their classmates' languages. After seeing the words written on the wall, students discussed similarities and differences in the languages. Many were able to point out cognates in English, French, and Spanish. Speakers of Mandarin Chinese explained that the words sounded different, but they pointed out clues within the written characters that helped them remember the meaning.

Celebrating Family Factors of Bilingualism. In order to involve families in our project, I sent a letter home each month to tell about the word the students had chosen and asked parents to help their children write the word in their home language. I also encouraged parents to help their children write a sentence with the word of the month.

Celebrating Languages

Month: March

Dear parents,

We have started a celebrating languages wall in our ELL classroom. Each month, our class picks a word of the month to share in their home language. This month, our word is **green**.

Please talk with your child about how to say this word in your home language or look it up on a translator website or app.

Green = _____
phrase/ sentence with **Green =**

Having a conversation with their parents about vocabulary and phrases in their home language for school purposes helped students see the academic benefits of bilingualism in addition to its social uses.

Celebrating Community Factors of Bilingualism. To demonstrate the value of being bilingual in our community, I introduced a guest writer section on our Celebrating Languages wall. Many teachers at our school grew up speaking a second language, have family members that know another language, or took foreign language classes in high school or college. At first, I would send out emails or walk around the building looking for volunteers to be guest writers. If they didn't know how to write the word, I showed them how to use an online translator to look it up. Students were surprised to see that



Top to Bottom: March Celebrating Languages, English: Green, Spanish: verde, French: Vert, Mandarin Chinese: 绿色, Guest Writer (German): Grün, Samoan: lanu meamata, Gujarati: Lila

Conclusion

From an early age, individual, family, and community factors shape the bilingual identities of ELLs. By addressing these factors in their classrooms, educators can promote positive bilingualism among their students. Teachers and specialists interested in starting a Celebrating Languages project in their classrooms could brainstorm ideas

with students on how they would like to represent their home languages at school. In this way, their linguistic diversity becomes a celebration of the unique and special gifts they bring to the classroom.

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