Affirming culture and cultural identity in the bilingual/ESL classrooms

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Introduction

In Texas and throughout the United States, the increasing linguistic diversity within educational settings necessitates the expansion of bilingual and ESL programs. Approximately 5 million school-age children in the U.S. are identified as English learners, and many more are raised in non-English-speaking households. This represents about one-quarter of all K-12 students in the U.S., amounting to nearly 18 million children, most of whom have immigrant parents (Mitchell, 2020a). The urgency to address their needs is amplified by concerns that prolonged school closures could worsen the challenges faced by this demographic, which already includes heightened risks of homelessness, hunger, and educational difficulties. Notably, native Spanish speakers constitute around 75% of the English learner population in the country (Mitchell, 2020b).

Bilingual education

Theories and research in cognitive psychology and language acquisition suggest that minority students' mastery of English is more effective when they first become proficient in their native language. Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis, a foundational theory in bilingual education, supports this perspective and posits that proficiency in a student's native language significantly enhances their ability to acquire a second language. According to Cummins (1979, 1981) research, cognitive and linguistic skills developed in the first language act as a transferable foundation, facilitating the acquisition of English and contributing to overall academic success in minority students. This foundational linguistic proficiency is crucial for their success in more advanced and secondary educational stages (Thomas and Collier, 1997). For students still acquiring the language used in their educational setting, it's essential to provide content in their native language to prevent them from falling behind in other subjects while learning English. Cultural elements are integral to bilingual/ESL education, regardless of whether the term "bicultural" is explicitly included. Culture, a fundamental aspect of language education, often goes unrecognized but remains central to the process. Fishman (1977) study highlights the inseparability of language from cultural identity, as language is always contextualized within cultural settings. Students navigating between two cultures or languages face the task of melding their heritage with their new cultural environment. Understanding culture extends beyond annual cultural celebrations; it involves delving into symbols, traditions, history, and beliefs in an educational setting. However, teaching culture can be challenging due to potential misunderstandings or insensitivity.

The term "Bilingual-Bicultural Dual Language Education" implies that such programs formally incorporate elements of students' cultural backgrounds, aiding in their cultural learning and fostering a sense of belonging within the school environment. Nonetheless, the connection between second language acquisition and bicultural development remains underexplored. Howard et al. (2007) point out that cultural learning offers a valuable opportunity for combining language instruction with content learning.

Bilingualism and cultural identity

Bi- or multilingual students engage daily in intricate linguistic practices. However, these practices often go unrecognized because they don't align with conventional monolingual frameworks, leading to a disregard for the diverse language skills essential for communication and academic success (Obeso, 2020). Students' background knowledge, derived from both formal education and personal experiences, is crucial for learning and comprehension. This is particularly true for English Language Learners (ELL), who come from varied cultural and educational backgrounds and have different levels of prior knowledge on any given subject. In secondary education, ELL students might range from those with extensive academic training in their native language to those with interrupted or minimal formal education. Since ELL students are not homogenous, educators must tailor materials and instruction to each student's needs (Bennett, 2020). When adapting teaching approaches, educators must consider the potential knowledge gaps ELL students might have regarding specific topics. Herrmann (2020) emphasizes the importance of connecting academic content with students' personal experiences. This approach not only enhances content comprehension and retention but also validates the students' cultural backgrounds and personal experiences.

In Texas, the Texas Education Agency (2023) guidelines for Bilingual Programs stipulate that bilingual programs should contain three major components: an academic component, a language development component, and a cultural and self-esteem component. Since the programs are developed to help children learn English and be successful in schools, certainly much attention is paid to the academic content and language development components, however, many times the cultural component is not emphasized. Culture is very much a part of language since many times the context of communication carries a cultural overtone. This presentation will focus on certain areas of Mexican culture presented in learning centers while incorporating the development of literacy skills. The theories supporting Bilingual/Bicultural education and ESL extend to content and curriculum. Students gain "a sense of empowerment when the content presented and ideas discussed are relevant to their experiences and histories" (Fern et al., 1995, p. 1).

When students encounter material that resonates with their cultural heritage, they tend to engage more deeply with the content (Gay, 2018). Recognizing the unique societal role of bilingual/bicultural individuals is crucial, and this is greatly facilitated by encouraging the learning of heritage languages, given the intrinsic connection between language and culture (Banks,

2006). Marcrum (2007) emphasizes the significance of language as a social and cultural construct, noting its vital role in self-identity and cultural understanding. The extent to which a student embraces biculturalism is closely tied to the support they receive from institutions influencing their language development.

Culture in the bilingual classroom

There are many examples of how culture can be taught in the classroom. Cultural learning centers can focus on many of the cultural and historical aspects of the cultures in the classroom. The learning center topics can be researched by the students or the teacher and provide literacy activities based on the topic and integrated with art, music, or hands-on activities that explore the content.

Educators have the opportunity to introduce a diverse range of cultural materials in various forms, such as DVDs, music, digital programs, guest lectures, children's books, and newspapers. They can encourage students to reflect on and discuss the differences between their own cultures and the ones being studied, using these materials as focal points for discussions or written assignments. Additionally, incorporating enjoyable activities like games, brief theatrical performances, debates, songs, reader's theater, or field trips can effectively capture students' attention and stimulate their interest in the subject matter (Dixon, 2021). As in all assignments ask students for information they already know about a culture, address stereotypes, clarify misconceptions, and assess misconceptions. Engagement strategies and discussions will help all students become more aware of the richness of multicultural perspectives and dispel perceptions, or prejudices.

Support families

Teachers should support the family's use of the home language with children because parents should speak the language in which they are proficient and feel most comfortable speaking. Research has found that when teachers encourage families to speak their home language with their child, while the teachers introduce English at school, children become fluent bilinguals (Lopez and Tapanes, 2011). Educators can follow four steps for developing a plan for family and community involvement in their classroom. (1) Collect and provide information. Take the opportunity to collect information about the families in your program. Take this opportunity to learn about what families' value and their traditions, etc. (2) Provide structure and ideas for family involvement and participation. Educators should provide for specific events and activities connecting the students and families to the classroom. (3) Support strategies for developing emergent bilinguals. Families often look to their teachers, programs, and advice regarding bilingual language development. Educators should always encourage communicate to parents the advantages of bilingualism. (4) There should be reciprocal relationships through regular, supportive communication. Educators need to support families in their roles as children's first teachers. Partnerships with parents need to be respectful and understanding of the vital role that families play in young children's development (MacWayne

et al., 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic, with the increased reliance on remote learning, it's essential to offer additional support to both parents and students. Babinski et al. (2020) provide four practical, evidence-based strategies to help educators mitigate learning losses among young English learners. These strategies include: (1) fostering students' emotional and mental wellbeing by maintaining connections with their schools and teachers; (2) encouraging families to communicate in their strongest language; (3) recognizing and utilizing the significant strengths inherent in bilingual families; and (4) creating more opportunities for teachers to collaborate effectively (Babinski et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Culture and language are very intertwined. All educators need to explicitly ensure that daily activities in the bilingual classrooms focus on the integration of culture and language to inform all bilingual students socially, emotionally, and cognitively. The review of the research has clearly noted the significance of students not only mastering the curriculum across various academic subjects, such as mathematics, science, language arts, and social studies, but also developing a strong sense of self-worth and belonging. This encompasses academic achievement and the critical aspects of each child's identity development and self-esteem. Furthermore, acquiring multiple languages, especially those tied to a student's cultural heritage, not only enhances their sense of identity and belonging but also significantly boosts their self-esteem and fosters a deeper connection with the classroom community, thereby enriching their educational experience throughout the school year.. Culture is couched in symbols, representative of customs, rituals, traditions, history, and beliefs that can be explained and explored in a classroom. The term "Bilingual-Bicultural Dual Language Education" signifies that these programs formally acknowledge and incorporate elements of a student's cultural heritage into their educational experience. This approach not only provides students with the chance to explore their own culture but also helps in fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance within the school and classroom settings (Howard et al., 2007).

It is important for teachers to not only to know the child culture, but also teach them about their culture along with their national and state curricular requirements. Building that bicultural and multicultural world of the future will lead to bringing the best minds working collaboratively to synergize for a better world. Dr. Sharroky Hollie stated in his three wishes for educational equity for 2021:

> "Number one: All students need to be validated and affirmed for who they are culturally and linguistically. Yes, all means all. Second, teachers need to be empowered to teach in ways that are culturally and linguistically responsive without reserve. The authentic magic of learning happens in

the classroom, and the most impactful relationship occurs between a teacher and a student. Thirdly, that leaders to lead with courage and boldness. Courage means disrupting the status quo or what has always been because 'that's the way it has been done.' Boldness requires enacting policies, practices, and procedures that can be instituted immediately to undo inequities related to literacy and language learning that have been in existence for too long (Hollie, 2021, p. 24)."

In all classrooms, but especially in bilingual classrooms, the importance of addressing the cultural aspect of a student's life should be integrated into the curriculum and not forgotten. As educators, we must continue to affirm the emergent bilinguals in our bilingual programs so that they can become successful citizens of our country. Beyond the "heroes and holidays" approach, carefully infused culturally responsive and culturally relevant concepts can create the positive, creative school and classroom environment that all students deserve.

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