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Emergent Bilinguals and TESOL: What's in a Name?

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■ One of today's most misunderstood issues in education throughout the world, and particularly in the United States, is how to educate students who speak languages other than English. In the United States, these students are most often referred to as English language learners (ELLs) by educators or as Limited English proficient students (LEPs) by legislators and the federal government. I argue here that *emergent bilinguals* might be a more appropriate term for these children.¹

Labeling students as either LEPs or ELLs omits an idea that is critical to the discussion of equity in the teaching of these children. When officials and educators ignore the bilingualism that these students can—and must—develop through schooling in the United States, they perpetuate inequities in the education of these children. Putting bilingualism at the center in speaking of these students is important for (a) the children themselves; (b) teachers and teaching; (c) educational policy makers; (d) parents and communities; (e) the field of language education and TESOL; and (f) societies at large. This article argues for the use of the term *emergent bilinguals* in referring to these students.

FOR THE CHILDREN

Calling these children emergent bilinguals makes reference to a positive characteristic—not one of being limited or being learners, as LEPs and ELLs suggest. The term emergent bilinguals refers to the children's potential in developing their bilingualism; it does not suggest a limitation or a problem in comparison to those who speak English. As such, bilingualism is recognized as a potential resource, both cognitively and socially, consistent with research on this topic (see, e.g., Bialystok, 2001; García, 2009, chapter 5). Thus, emergent bilinguals are seen as having an advantage over those who speak English only and for whom becoming bilingual will be more difficult.

The other reason for referring to these children as emergent bilinguals is that it does away with the false categorization of children as either

¹ I have argued elsewhere for the use of this term. See García, Kleifgen, & Falchi (2008).

limited English proficient (LEP) or English proficient (EP). Emphasizing the students' emergent bilingualism places students on a bilingual continuum of more or less accessibility to languaging bilingually.² Categorizing children as LEPs or EPs is a dubious construction that misleads educators and that robs emergent bilinguals of languaging and educational possibilities.

Understanding how the present categories of LEP and EP are created in the United States may shed light on why the term *emergent bilingual* might better serve its children. At present, and for the federal government, LEPs are those students who have been identified in the U.S. Census as speaking English less than very well. Aside from the known limitations of census self-report data and, in the case of children, family report data, this categorization has other problems. The monoglossic and monolingual ideology that permeates the United States takes the most extreme definition—considering as LEPs all those who speak English less than very well. But if we adopt a more heteroglossic approach, allowing for bilingual practices that do not have English monolingualism as the sole standard, emergent bilinguals would be considered only those who do not speak English at all, potentializing their ability to move on the bilingual continuum and to join those whose home language practices include minority home languages as well as English. The potential of bilingualism would then be maximized.

FOR TEACHERS AND TEACHING

Shedding the terms *ELLs* and *LEPs* would also accommodate the more heteroglossic language practices of emergent bilinguals and bilinguals in general. Teachers would then be able to hold higher expectations of these children and not simply remediate their limitations and their English learning.

In recognizing the children's emergent bilingualism, educators would be building from the students' strengths—their home language and cultural practices. They could then use the children's home language and bilingual practices rather than suppressing them or ignoring them. In this way, educators would be able to develop pedagogical practices that are more consistent with research that supports the use of the children's home language practices (see, e.g., Ramirez et al., 1992; Thomas & Collier, 2002).

² I prefer to talk about *language practices* or *languaging*, and of *languaging bilingually* or *translanguaging*. I use these terms to suggest that bilinguals engage in practices that are rarely based on two autonomous languages in ways often described by linguists and educators. See Makoni and Pennycook (2007).

FOR EDUCATIONAL POLICYMAKERS

Focusing on the emergent bilingualism of these children, instead of on their limitations and their English learning status, would also help policymakers base educational decisions for these children on their strengths. Thus, instead of providing the remedial education with which these children are often confronted, educational policymakers would be providing them with more rigorous curriculum and more challenging instructional material. Insisting that these children are emergent bilinguals in a bilingual continuum would also call for the development of bilingual education programs and bilingual pedagogy for all children, not just for those to whom this article refers as emergent bilinguals.

Without an ELL or LEP category, it would also be easier for educational policymakers to demand that assessment be valid for all bilinguals. A more flexible norm could then be adopted that would include all children along a bilingual continuum, instead of insisting on a rigid monolingual standard.

More significantly, however, is the fact that if the category LEP is abandoned, there will be no need to exit children out of that category in the 1 to 3 years that the federal government mandates. Instead, emergent bilingual children would slide along the bilingual continuum as their language practices develop complexity and eventually encompass the academic standard language practices of school. Educational policymakers could thus be more patient, understanding that, as research has clearly shown, it takes children 5 to 7 years to develop decontextualized academic skills in one or the other language (Cummins, 1981, 2000; Hakuta, Goto Butler, & Witt, 2000).

FOR PARENTS AND COMMUNITY

Calling these students by a name that does not focus on their limitations would mean that the parental language practices in the home would be the source of the educational expertise. Instead of assigning blame to parents and community for language practices that exclude English, using the proper terminology would encourage the school to see the parents and community as the experts in the child's language and cultural practices that are the basis of all learning. As such, the parents and community would participate in the education of their children from a position of strength, and not from a position of limitations.

FOR THE LANGUAGE EDUCATION PROFESSION AND TESOL

The language education profession is divided in ways that do not support the holistic education of children. Focusing on the children's emergent

bilingualism would integrate the four separate aspects of language education—the teaching of English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), bilingual education (BE), the teaching of the heritage language when available (HL), and the teaching of another foreign language (FL). Teaching would then be centered on the student, and not on the profession.

By focusing on the children’s emergent bilingualism and making bilingualism the norm, the field of language education would be able to move to the center of all educational endeavors for all children. The language education profession must include not just those who speak other languages at home, but also those who speak English and who are becoming bilingual. For TESOL, this change would result in a much more inclusive stance that would recognize the bilingualism of the students served by the profession as an important resource in teaching and learning English.

FOR SOCIETY

Bilingual practices are more important in the 21st century than ever. It is clear that the ability to translate, to develop flexible language practices, to language bilingually or translanguaging (García, 2009) will be very important resources for all in the future.

The language resources of the United States have never been greater. Despite its insistence on being a monolingual state, the United States has perhaps the world’s most complex bilingual practices. The benefits of harnessing these linguistic resources are more evident than ever for society at large.

CONCLUSION

The names we use mean something. By looking at children through a monolingual and monoglossic lens and insisting on categorizing them as LEPs or ELLs, the U.S. educational system perpetuates educational inequities and squanders valuable linguistic resources.

I have argued in this article that in order to restore educational equity and harness bilingualism as a resource, we should start by referring to these children as emergent bilinguals. Placing bilingualism at the heart of TESOL will yield many benefits. There will not only be benefits to the children, but also to teachers, educational policymakers, parents, communities, and society at large. And there will be benefit to the language education profession, a profession that is in need of serious overhaul. For TESOL itself, adopting the use of the term *emergent bilinguals* to talk about the students it serves—instead of English language learners, limited English proficient, or English as an additional language students—would mean including the many languages that make up the TESOL

profession and its students, acknowledging the important role that the students' home languages have in English language acquisition, and presenting the acquisition of English not as a monolingual or monoglossic endeavor, but as one that is bilingual at its core. It would finally recognize that success in teaching English means becoming bilingual, and that the success of the TESOL profession depends, in large part, on the multilingualism of the world and the bilingualism of its students—and not on English monolingualism.

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