

Chapter 4

Roadblocks to Bilingualism

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ABSTRACT

Most teacher candidates have little experience with learning other languages. They therefore become cogs in the assimilationist machine that causes immigrants to lose native languages and become monolingual in English (Rumbaut, Massey, & Bean, 2006). In a time of devaluing immigrants (and their languages) and failure on the part of most Americans to learn other languages, educators need to focus on the role of other languages in promoting multicultural understanding and to increase language learning in the US. This chapter examines bilingual teacher candidates' experiences with language learning. For four years, students studying for ESL/bilingual licensure were asked to rate their language abilities, finding that 30% rated themselves as bilingual, with 70.43% of bilinguals describing themselves as heritage speakers. The authors report the overall findings as well as the bilingual heritage speaker candidates' own words on their experiences with language learning and maintaining their bilingualism.

INTRODUCTION

What do you call a person who speaks many languages?

A polyglot

What do you call a person who speaks two languages?

Bilingual

What do you call a person who only speaks one language?

An American

(A popular joke)

Unfortunately, this joke is all too true when interacting with Americans. In fact, two of the authors of this chapter have been teaching candidates for English as a Second Language (ESL) or bilingual licensure at the university level and have witnessed first-hand how lingua-phobic we Americans actually are, observing large numbers of students who have minimal knowledge of languages other than English. While conducting a larger study focused on examining the experiences and attitudes of pre-teacher candidates for ESL/bilingual licensure toward language learning, the researchers noticed a group of students who had succeeded in overcoming several blockages in order to maintain ability in their heritage language at a high enough level in order to qualify as bilingual teachers.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the roadblocks that these heritage speakers encountered and how they overcame them to become bilingual teachers or candidates. To accomplish this, data from a larger, more general study will shed light on the number of teacher candidates who surmounted obstacles to achieve or maintain bilingualism among all students seeking ESL/bilingual licensure. In addition, the present study will share testimonials written by the bilingual heritage speakers to clarify the common patterns among them as they struggled to preserve bilingual abilities. Finally, the study will draw implications for teaching and how to improve education to remove some of the obstructions that prevent heritage speakers from sustaining their bilingual ability.

BACKGROUND

Benefits of Language Learning

For the heritage speakers in this study, the fact that they had to struggle to maintain bilingual status was unfortunate due to the extensive benefits that have been found to result from speaking more than one language, including cognitive (Adesope, Lavin, Thompson, & Ungerleider, 2010; Peal & Lambert, 1962), educational (Thomas & Collier, 2012), communicative (Diaz & Klingler, 1991), economic (Rumbaut, 2014), and cultural advantages (Pae, 2012). Formerly in the first half of the twentieth century, researchers assumed that bilingual children would be at a disadvantage when mastering an additional language and that their progress in one or both languages would be delayed. But since Peal and Lambert (1962) did the first carefully controlled study comparing cognition between bilinguals and monolinguals, a mountain of results have indicated that bilingualism leads to extensive cognitive advantages –the only debate in the literature today concerns how large the advantage is and the precise cognitive domains

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