

Chapter 9

Understanding Diverse Bilingual Learners: The Need for a Transdisciplinary Lens

Amy A. Weimer

University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley, USA

Mario Gil

University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley, USA

J. Joy Esquierdo

University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley, USA

ABSTRACT

The chapter synthesizes findings from diverse disciplinary perspectives to make the case that we need a new lens to better serve the diversity of bilingual learners. Drawing upon theories and findings from studies by educators, child developmentalists, and neuroscientists, but moving beyond any one disciplinary perspective, the authors aim to create a unity of new knowledge developed of theories from across disciplines. This approach is exactly what is needed to address the complexity of factors surrounding bilingual learners. Taking a transdisciplinary approach will allow us to move closer toward an understanding of the many factors affecting bilingual children and families, and this new knowledge can be applied to promote their educational and lifelong success.

INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, as an undergraduate student, I had the privilege of enrolling in an academic internship course. Though I was studying psychology, I chose to intern at a Head Start preschool, which eventuated in my becoming a co-teacher. I began my experience in the classroom because of my desire to teach young children, but quickly realized that I was the true learner in this experience. Of the 20 young children, five spoke mostly Spanish, and they quickly piqued my intellectual interests. One of the young boys, Eddie, was quite the classroom wanderer. He just never sat still! He seemed to enjoy every area of

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-8283-0.ch009

teaching space, even the dramatic play section, mostly inhabited by the girls, and would “disrupt” circle time if he happened to find it more interesting to take up a paint brush. With great curiosity, I watched him one day carefully wrap a doll in a baby blanket, balance his baby in one arm, while pretending to phone his invisible wife, presumably away at work. He was clearly mimicking his own father, an involved family man whom I often talked with during drop-off or pick-up times. This observation was only one of many that I had that caused me to reflect on this young boys’ familismo (high value of family; loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity with family; Gonzales, Germán, & Fabrett, 2012) and other positive cultural characteristics of Mexican American families that can easily go unnoticed in our school systems. Eddie, an emerging Spanish-English bilingual, held incredible assets of linguistic and cultural wealth, as do many young children in immigrant families.

Bilingual learners, also are referred to in research studies and by the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018) as English Language Learners (ELLs) or children with Limited-English-Proficiency (LEP), have many unique strengths that they bring to the classroom. The present chapter focuses on these assets and the term bilingual learner is used throughout to a) emphasize that bilingual learners are doing much more than just learning English-- they are simultaneously developing a second language, subject area knowledge, and thinking skills; and b) highlight bilingual learners’ accomplishments rather than deficits.

It is only when we broaden our views that we learn to see how the many sociocultural facets of a child’s life are resources that shape the course of their development. In fact, to truly understand the ways in which we can work together to create positive pathways, it may be necessary to add new lenses, transcending any one vantage point, to understand the many layers that affect educational outcomes of diverse learners.

Taking a transdisciplinary approach is quite different from simply merging two or more interdisciplinary approaches, which can sometimes fail to identify important differences in value and epistemology. Transdisciplinary approaches move from a problem outward without interest in concretizing any one discipline’s value system, theory, or research perspective, but rather creating a unity of new knowledge developed of theories from across disciplines. This approach is exactly what is needed to address the complexity of factors surrounding bilingual learners. By aggregating findings from studies by educators, child developmentalists, and neuroscientists, we move closer toward an understanding of the many predictors of bilingual children’s development, which can be used to ensure their lifelong and educational success. The present chapter synthesizes findings from diverse disciplinary perspectives to make the case that we need a new lens to better serve the diversity of bilingual learners.

Contemporary theories from developmental science describe the interplay of biological, sociocultural, ecological, and historical factors on development (e.g., Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006; Lerner, 2006). From developmental science, we learn that to fully understand any aspect of development, it is important to view the individual from a holistic perspective, investigating not only multiple predictors of developmental outcomes, but also the many ways that these predictors interact to produce the outcomes. It also is critical to consider the diversity of bilingual learners from those who are challenged by learning disabilities to those who are gifted and talented, and even those who may be a combination of both.

Educational theories have described the diversity of how emergent bilingual Latino students might display their characteristics of gifted and talented differently than mainstream, middle-class students. Nevertheless, most educators and educational researchers continue to use the framework for gifted and talented established by Renzulli (1999) that focuses on three dimensions in mainstream giftedness: above average ability, creativity, and task commitment. There is limited literature on how gifted and

12 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:
www.igi-global.com/chapter/understanding-diverse-bilingual-learners/226000

Related Content

Toward a Participatory View of Early Literacies in Second Language Contexts: A Reflection on Research From Colombia

Claudia Cañas, Ángela Patricia Ocampo, Ana Karina Rodríguez, Mónica López-Ladino and Raúl Alberto Mora (2018). *Handbook of Research on Pedagogies and Cultural Considerations for Young English Language Learners* (pp. 300-324).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/toward-a-participatory-view-of-early-literacies-in-second-language-contexts/190985

Experiential Metafunctional Analysis of Liu Xijun's "Bei Chou Ge" and Its English Versions

Cheng Huaming (2023). *International Journal of Translation, Interpretation, and Applied Linguistics* (pp. 1-11).

www.irma-international.org/article/experiential-metafunctional-analysis-of-liu-xijuns-bei-chou-ge-and-its-english-versions/316932

English Language Interventions that Improve International Business Student Group-Work Performance

Paul R. Alexander and Patricia M. Dooley (2017). *Intercultural Responsiveness in the Second Language Learning Classroom* (pp. 202-221).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/english-language-interventions-that-improve-international-business-student-group-work-performance/174550

An Analysis of the Possibilities of the Use of Technology for the Learning of Languages: From CSCL to Cloud Computing and MOOCs

María A. Pérez-Juárez, Míriam Antón-Rodríguez, Francisco J. Díaz-Pernas, Mario Martínez-Zarzuela and David González-Ortega (2020). *Language Learning and Literacy: Breakthroughs in Research and Practice* (pp. 611-635).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/an-analysis-of-the-possibilities-of-the-use-of-technology-for-the-learning-of-languages/233120

Rewriting of Text and Paratext: Reception of "Bushido: The Soul of Japan" in a Chinese Context

Xiao Li (2022). *International Journal of Translation, Interpretation, and Applied Linguistics* (pp. 1-12).

www.irma-international.org/article/rewriting-of-text-and-paratext/304076