

Chapter 2

Preserving the Mother Tongue of English Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

The growing presence of English language learners (ELLs) in classrooms throughout the country highlights the need for effective strategies in the process of language acquisition. Through the language acquisition process students are able to progress towards becoming fluent in the English language and ultimately perform on the same academic level as their English-speaking peers. The issue arises when ELLs enter the classroom with a language or word gap that places them at an academic disadvantage. Bilingual education is an option that is offered to students seeking to enhance their native language abilities as they acquire the English language. However, bilingual education is limited to the presence of a specific language community and an effective language teacher. This chapter presents the benefits of preserving the mother tongue among ELLs and the strategies necessary to replicate mother tongue preservation with language learners in non-bilingual classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

The “language gap”, also known as the “word gap”, relates to the fewer number of words low-income children are exposed to during their language acquisition stage in comparison to children from high-income households (Raz & Beatty, 2018). The level of language exposure children receive during their early years is integral towards the development of their brain structure and ongoing cognitive abilities (Romeo, Leonard, Robinson, West, Mackey, Rowe, & Gabrieli, 2018). According to Jensen (2013), by age four children from low-income families in the United States hear an average of thirteen million words, children from middle-class families hear about twenty six million words, and children from upper-income families hear about forty six million words. The lack of exposure to words during early childhood places children from low-income families at an academic disadvantage as compared to their peers (Jensen, 2013). As students from low-income families progress through school, the language gap

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steadily increases and their inability to meet grade level standards becomes heightened. Therefore, the language gap contributes to the overall academic deficiencies of students from impoverished communities.

The passing of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 established the notion of maintaining high expectations for all students by increasing the accountability on schools and teachers to attain grade-level proficiency of all student subgroups in American schools (Good, Masewicz & Vogel, 2010). As mandated by NCLB, standardized tests serve as the determinant of student academic achievement. English language learners (ELLs), as a subgroup, enter classrooms at varying levels of English proficiency with distinct cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Therefore, the NCLB requirement of grade-level proficiency on standardized tests administered in English poses a challenge for ELLs who are developing their English language abilities while navigating proficiency in the academic content (Sanchez, 2017). Teachers of language learners must be able to determine if their underachievement stems from limited language production or limited cognitive ability (De Jong & Harper, 2005). Language plays a pivotal role in the ways in which students both acquire the curriculum and are assessed on it (Sanchez, 2017). Without the proper language abilities, students face increased difficulty when trying to demonstrate grade level proficiency on state mandated exams. ELLs who have the cognitive ability in their native language are presented with the challenge of having to acquire the English language before they are able to make the academic transfer.

The presence of the academic achievement gap between ELLs and their English-speaking peers poses issues for education stakeholders as the immigrant population continues to rise throughout the country. According to Garcia (2011), ELLs underperform their English-speaking peers by thirty to fifty percent at almost every grade level as depicted by national and state tests. This chapter addresses the gap in the literature by analyzing the benefits of preserving the mother tongue of ELLs to help bridge the language gap and ultimately close the achievement gap. Mother tongue preservation is a practice most closely associated with bilingual education. However, the option of bilingual instruction is limited to teacher and curriculum availability. Therefore, language learners in non-bilingual classrooms need effective practices and strategies that address their academic needs by way of their cultural and linguistic diversity. This chapter provides a breakdown of the different options of bilingual education available in schools throughout the country. The characteristics and benefits of bilingual education are discussed and addressed throughout this chapter in order to contribute to the understanding of the ways in which native language preservation enhances the educational outcomes of ELLs.

Current available research on improving the academic performance of ELLs focuses on developing English proficiency. However, the benefits of preserving the mother tongue with linguistically diverse students are essential to their learning. This chapter seeks to present students' linguistic diversity as an asset to their learning rather than as a deficit. Garcia (2011) argues that the effective education of ELLs requires teachers showing respect for the cultural and linguistic roots of students by sustaining and utilizing these roots in the processes of teaching and learning. Educators of ELLs require the additional recognition of the ways in which students' unique linguistic characteristics contribute to their learning and are overall integral to who they are as learners. This chapter begins with a literature review regarding the language gap of English language learners and the role of bilingual education in helping to bridge the gap. The theoretical framework guiding this chapter is the linguistic interdependence hypothesis proposed by Cummins (1979) in which second language acquisition is most effective when the first language is developed. This chapter ends with a summary of solutions and recommendations that non-bilingual classrooms can adopt to improve the academic success of ELLs. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to acknowledge the preservation of minority languages as a necessity for improving the academic

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