



WHO “GETS” TO BE BILINGUAL?



The Seal of Biliteracy has social justice roots. Promoted by Californians Together, a non-profit coalition supporting educational equity, the Seal was initially intended to demonstrate the value of bilingualism by attaching a prestigious credential to the diplomas of students who demonstrate proficiency in two or more languages by the time they graduate from high school. There was a special, though certainly not exclusive, focus on demonstrating the linguistic assets (rather than the deficits) that emerging bilinguals bring to the table.

Yet as the Seal has spread to other states, a [recent study](#) suggests the program may have strayed from its equity-based origins in that it privileges native English speakers. The study found that students of color and students from low-income families are less likely to participate than students who are white and/or from higher income families.

In the Q&A below, NEPC Fellow [Beatriz Arias](#) discusses the Seal in the context of broader trends affecting emerging bilinguals in the United States. [Arias](#) is former Vice President and Chief Development Officer for the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), a nonprofit organization based in Washington, DC. Currently she is a Senior Research Scientist for CAL. Arias is an emeritus Professor at Arizona State University with expertise in policy issues for Latinx students, including bilingual education and school desegregation.

Q: What are “Seals of Biliteracy?” How did they come about? Recent research has found that schools with higher percentages of students of color and students from low-income families are less likely to participate in Seals of Biliteracy programs. Why do you think this might be occurring?

A: *The Seal of Biliteracy is an award placed on the student’s high school diploma in recognition of achieving bilingual proficiency. The Seal of Biliteracy program began in 2011*

in California as a collaboration between the California Association of Bilingual Education (CABE) and Californians Together. The goal was to give recognition to students' linguistic accomplishments and add a tangible benefit to being bilingual. The Seal becomes part of a student's high school transcript and is a highly visible recognition of success. By 2017, 30 states and the District of Columbia had adopted the Seal. That number has continued to grow since then.

Some states have been very successful in promoting the Seal. In 2018, 11 percent of California's graduating class attained the Seal of Biliteracy. However, there is concern about unequal access to the language curriculum and to the assessment required to qualify for the Seal. Each state determines the criteria for the Seal, and in most cases, requires successful enrollment in advanced language classes. Schools in wealthier neighborhoods tend to have a more comprehensive world language curriculum in comparison to schools in poorer neighborhoods. For instance, they may have the opportunity to take more advanced language courses that are not necessarily offered in lower income communities with fewer resources. This gives them an advantage when it comes to obtaining the Seal. Also, the exams approved for the Seal are those developed for more commonly taught languages such as Spanish, French and German. Less commonly taught languages such as Hmong, Malayalam, and Navajo do not have comparable exams. Consequently, native speakers of these languages may not be able to take the exams required to earn the Seal.

Additionally, Emerging Bilinguals (EBs) sometimes have higher hurdles to earn the Seal because the criteria for earning the Seal mandate that ELs also pass English-proficiency tests—holding them to a higher standard in their second language (English) than native English speakers. These two factors can impede the access of EBs and low-income students to the Seal.

Q: You referred to “Emerging Bilinguals.” In recent years, many people in this field have shifted from speaking of “English language learners” (ELLs) to speaking of “Emergent bilinguals” (EBs—which is the term we use throughout this newsletter). What is the thinking behind this change, and does it reflect actual policy and practice in the classroom?

A: *The field is leading a shift in the terminology used to define English Language Learner and how that learner is perceived, moving from a deficit-based term to an asset-based term. “English Language Learner” limits and focuses the identification of students in terms of their English proficiency. In the past, the terms for Emergent Bilinguals have emphasized their limitations and deficits: “Limited English Proficient” and “Non-English-speaking” were terms that were used officially. But this terminology presents a stigmatizing picture of EBs, defined by their limitations in English: non and limited.*

A fresh focus on a new term, Emergent Bilingual, puts an emphasis on the students' assets, their bilingualism and their potential for growth. This terminology helps teachers recognize students' dynamic bilingualism and develop pedagogical practices that are consistent with an understanding of children's home language practices. Teachers are developing innovative ways to include community language in their classrooms. By focusing on EBs, teachers can develop more rigorous instruction and challenging material. For parents and communities looking at the child through the lens of assets, the term EB brings attention to

home language use and parents' role in language learning.

Q: Historically, has bilingualism been the primary objective for EBs in U.S. public schools? Why or why not?

A: *Across United States history, the tolerance and acceptance of bilingualism has ebbed and flowed, ranging from permissive acceptance of bilingualism to highly restrictive language policies. Attitudes toward bilingual speakers have fluctuated similarly. Since its founding, the United States has been a country of many languages, distinguished by its linguistic diversity, starting with the Indigenous language and including the vast array of languages spoken by immigrants who have settled here. However, attitudes toward the value of bilingualism and bilinguals have historically been influenced by immigration patterns and by attitudes towards immigrants and indigenous peoples. Attitudes have also been influenced by the shifting perspectives on what it means to be an American. In general, most non-English-speaking immigrants lose the mother tongue by the third generation.*

*In the 1940s and 50s, Spanish-speaking EBs were often punished for using Spanish in school and on the playground. The history of this restrictive period remains vivid in the memories of many Spanish-speaking parents who chose not to let their children learn Spanish at home for fear that they would be punished in school. A more permissive language policy was ushered in with the passage of the Bilingual Education Act (BEA) in 1968. This law encouraged school districts to experiment with new pedagogical approaches for EBs. Significantly, the Supreme Court decision in *Lau v. Nichols (1974)* underscored the school district's responsibility to provide appropriate relief through, e.g., programs and accommodations to children who did not speak English. These policies emphasized the importance of instruction for EBs that is comprehensible, but they did not require bilingual education. Reaction to this more tolerant policy was soon followed by the onset of the "English Only" movement in the 1980s.*

Recently a wave of anti-bilingual policy swept California, Arizona and Massachusetts. California's "English for the Children" proposition passed in 1998 and was just rescinded in 2016. For a generation, bilingual education was prohibited in California. It is still the law in Arizona and Massachusetts although lawmakers in both states have watered down the acts. In today's political climate, it is accurate to say the bilingualism is not the goal for EBs; the goal is learning English, often at the expense of losing the mother tongue. This policy was promoted in 2002 with the No Child Left Behind reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which required a high-stakes testing system that promoted the adoption and implementation of English-only instruction driven by English language assessments. In general, while maintaining bilingualism may have been a personal or familial goal, public schooling has not been an effective vehicle for maintaining the bilingualism of EBs.

Q: What about today? To what degree is the development of bilingualism an emphasis for EBs? To what extent is it an emphasis for monolingual or native English speakers? Why or why not?

A: *In the United States today, there are states that promote bilingualism for EBs and there*

are states that restrict the acquisition of the mother tongue, until the student is English proficient. Recently, California rescinded a sanction on bilingual education that had been in effect for two decades. Arizona and Massachusetts still restrict bilingual education programs in school until certain English requirements have been met.

In large part due to the impact of the *Lau v. Nichols* Supreme Court decision, state policies articulate a range of instructional options for EBs which include a transitional type of bilingual program. A transitional bilingual program utilizes the students' native language as a bridge to English. Dual Language Programs are designed to develop bilingualism and biliteracy for both EBs and monolingual or native English speakers. Dual Language programs are increasing in popularity, not only among EBs but also among native English speakers.

There is a growing awareness of the benefits of bilingualism for all, according to a recent *National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine report (2017)*. Those who become proficient in both a home or primary language are likely to reap benefits in cognitive, social, emotional development and may also be able to protect from brain decline at older ages. Main findings of the report include:

- All children and youth have the capacity to become bilingual or multilingual given the appropriate opportunities.
- Many institutions responsible for the education of dual language learners and English learners (DLLs and ELs) are failing to provide them with appropriate opportunities to learn.
- DLLs/ELs strong acquisition of their first language serves as a foundation for learning English as a language that is essential for educational success in the United States.

The Commission on Language Learning, a part of the National Academy of Sciences, has recommended the development of a national strategy for developing bilingualism. This strategy includes improving access to as many languages as possible and developing schools where meaningful world language instruction is standard practice.

In summary, we today have policies in place that promote bilingualism for all, but the resources to provide bilingual instruction available only for some. There are severe shortages of bilingual teachers and administrators to accommodate all who wish to follow this path.

Given a choice, most ELs would prefer bilingual education, but sometimes that is not an option.

Q: Can you tell us about two or three research findings over the past few years, concerning the education of EBs, that are important – that we should know about?

A: A very important research fact to highlight is that a bilingual approach to teaching with EBs is the most effective instructional approach in terms of language development and math achievement. A 12-year study of four models of EB instruction found that in all four

programs, more than 80% of the EBs were proficient in English by the end of elementary school. However, students in the four programs attained proficiency at different rates. EBs in the bilingual program took longer to reach proficiency than students in the immersion program. This is an important finding, that English Proficiency develops slightly more slowly for students in bilingual programs than for students in immersion programs (English only). However, when it came to progress in English Language Arts and Math, the bilingual programs were more effective than the English immersion program. This research supports using a bilingual approach to teach EBs in order to support their achievement not only in English, but also in language arts and math.

The lesson from this research is that as educators and the informed public, we need to take the long view and recognize that developing proficiency and academic attainment in two languages takes time. EBs are learning many things at once: academic content, English, and literacy in the native languages. The researchers behind this 12-year study recommend that districts invest in high-quality two-language programs, noting that the benefits of two-language instruction may have important implications for closing the achievement gap between EBs and non-EBs.

A second research finding worth noting adds a new term to our discussion of bilingualism: *translanguaging*. The researchers urge us to look at the language use of bilinguals not as adding one language to another language, but as a continuum of linguistic competence and a reflection of how bilingual speakers compose their speech. In the classroom, pedagogical translanguaging is planned by the teachers and recognized as a legitimate teaching resource. It validates the language used in the community by using it in school purposefully. This approach brings a more holistic way of viewing language and language speakers.

Q: Given our current political climate and its emphasis on detaining and deporting refugees and immigrants, how do you see participation in dual language and Seal of Biliteracy programs changing, if at all, over the next five years?

A: Our current political climate can be described as isolationist. It is a climate that is not supportive of diversity: racial, ethnic, religious or linguistic. There are many who demand: "This is America, speak English!" and who are deaf to the reality that American is plurilingual and that more than 350 languages are spoken here.

This linguistic isolationism is contrasted with the recent growth of Dual Language programs that offer Arabic, French, Korean, Japanese, Mandarin and Spanish. These programs are expanding in many states, so we see that, amid the isolationism, there is a globalist trend. Dual Language programs usually begin in the elementary school, but with the promise of the Seal of Biliteracy, they are expanding to the secondary level. Multilingual America is galvanized by globalism and eager to make contacts across borders and across nations. Multilingual America recognizes the economic benefit of bilingualism/multilingualism, asserts the importance of learning languages through participation in dual language programs, and values acquiring the Seal of Biliteracy. Multilingual America recognizes that the benefits of bilingualism are both cognitive and social.

The growth of Dual Language programs is fueled by several factors. EBs wish to maintain

and develop their first languages while learning English. Well-informed parents, including those whose children are not EBs, value the cognitive, economic, social and personal benefits of bilingualism. Research demonstrates that Dual Language programs are effective.

The fact that there are so many waiting lists for students to enroll in Dual Language programs is one indicator of their popularity and endurance. The fact that so many states have adopted the Seal of Biliteracy is another. In the next five years, I predict that Dual Language programs will continue to grow and to incorporate additional languages.

NEPC Resources on Language Policy

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

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