



COLUMN: BILITERACY IN TEXAS

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COLUMN INTRODUCTION

The number of bilingual students in our schools is growing which includes many different kinds of learners, each with their unique potential and literacy needs. These multilingual learners are in various educational programs including mainstream, ESL, sheltered, bilingual, language immersion, or world language classes. Though not mutually exclusive, we might refer to them by using these categories: emergent bilinguals (students who are acquiring English as an additional language), heritage language speakers (students who speak a language of their parents in addition to English), simultaneous bilinguals (students who have grown up with more than one language), sequential bilinguals (students who are acquiring an additional language after the beginning of formal education such as in a secondary world language classroom), or even dual-language learners (students are beginning their education by receiving instruction in two languages). This myriad of classifications of bilingual students only scratches the surface of understanding this growing and complex group of global citizens. Therefore, there is a need for all literacy educators (bilingual or not) to have working knowledge of biliteracy assessment, development, and instruction in order to help all students reach their full potential. This column will be devoted to discussing relevant trends of biliteracy in the state of Texas. The first contribution comes from a group of scholars at the University of North Texas who conduct research about the Seal of Biliteracy. If you would like to contribute to future columns, please contact the editor at MStewart7@twu.edu.

THE SEAL OF BILITERACY

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Bilingual Education programs have experienced an exponential growth over the last decade. At the time of this writing, the Center for Applied Linguistics lists 824 dual language (DL) programs where students learn in and about the Arabic, French, German, Japanese, Mandarin, Russian and Spanish languages. DL programs aim at attaining three goals: full bilingualism and biliteracy, reaching academic achievement at or above grade level, and obtaining cross-cultural skills. The impressive growth of these programs in most of the United States is one of the latest signs of the increased popularity of enrichment models where the goal is to add a second language to the students' linguistic repertoire.

This increased popularity of DL programs has also generated critical insight around issues of equity and social justice, as the “whitening” of these programs (Flores & García, 2017) is contributing to



gentrification processes (Chaparro, 2017; Heiman & Yanes, 2018; Valdez et al., 2016) that de-center the original beneficiaries of Bilingual Education programs. The combination of explosive growth, increased popularity, and these gentrification processes has also engendered an urgent call to promote, in addition to the three previously mentioned goals, critical consciousness for all stakeholders in DL programs (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2019). One of the core elements of this fourth goal of critical consciousness is the need to historicize the field of bilingual education around its activist roots and its original focus on the educational needs of racialized bilingual populations.

A second indication of how fashionable DL education has become is the passage of the legislative initiative known as the Seal of Biliteracy (hereinafter, the Seal) in 36 states. The Seal, born out of a grassroots movement in California, was approved by the Texas legislature in 2014 under Texas House Bill 5 (HB5), which allowed school districts to award students a performance acknowledgment for outstanding achievements in bilingualism and biliteracy. The actual manifestation of the Seal varies from one school district to another but usually includes a seal affixed to the students' transcript and/or diploma and some form of ceremonial token such as a medallion, ribbon, cord, or stole that can be worn during high school graduation.

The eligibility criteria stated in HB5 describes the steps that high school students must follow to demonstrate proficiency in two or more languages. Primarily, it is necessary that students complete all English Language Arts course requirements with at least an 80 percent average. Additionally, they need to show proficiency in at least one more language, which can be fulfilled in several ways:

- Completing at least 3 credits in a foreign language (or subject area taught in another language) with an 80 percent average or higher.
- Demonstrating proficiency in at least a Level IV in a language other than English with an 80 percent average or higher.
- Demonstrating proficiency by scoring 3 or higher on an Advanced Placement world language exam.
- Demonstrating proficiency by scoring 4 or higher on an International Baccalaureate world language exam.
- Demonstrating proficiency by scoring Intermediate High (or equivalent) on a national assessment of language proficiency.

In addition to these language requirements, English learners must also have been exited from an English as a second language or Bilingual program and score at the advanced high level on the TELPAS exam.

The newfound focus on critical consciousness mentioned above has important connections to the Seal, as we argue that there is a need to warrant another “cautionary note” (Valdés, 1997) due to what we envision will be a growing popularity and potential gentrification of this program. Renowned Bilingual Education scholar Guadalupe Valdés emitted the original “cautionary note” in



1997 in connection to the possible dangers of equipping the dominant group with even more power as a result of acquiring a second language, what Davin and Heineke (2018) call elite Bilingualism. Valdés foreshadowed our current moment in Bilingual Education, as elite Bilingualism is a “choice” and “privilege” (Somerville & Faltis, 2019) that oftentimes overshadows and overpowers the needs of racialized bilingual populations (Flores, 2019). As scholars who are concerned about this possible “neoliberal hijacking” (Cervantes-Soon, 2018) of Bilingual Education and DL programs, we offer this “cautionary note” to promote critical consciousness about the Seal and as a point of reflection as to whose interests are being served, those of elite Bilinguals or racialized Bilinguals. Due to the Seal being in its nascent stage, the jury is still out. Nonetheless, based on current trends and the rebranding of Bilingual Education as dual language programs, we need to be vigilant and make sure equity and social justice are at the forefront by first and foremost centering the needs of racialized Bilinguals.

Anecdotal evidence shows that few school districts in Texas are currently awarding the Seal. It may be necessary for teachers to seek out further information from administrators regarding any district guidelines for eligibility. Principals are often key decision makers in determining whether campuses will make the Seal available to students. They are also a vital component in ensuring that the sufficient course options are offered to become eligible for the performance acknowledgement. Here, we encourage teachers to inquire with their campus administration about ways to support students in their pursuit of the Seal. It is crucial for schools to share information with students and parents regarding eligibility so that the proper courses are planned prior to graduation. To allow adequate time in the class schedule, students should be aware of the path to earning the Seal during the middle school years in order to prepare for the sufficient amount of language courses required.

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