



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.

If you would like to contribute to future columns, please contact the editor at MStewart7@twu.edu.

ADVOCATING FOR MULTILINGUALISM IN TEXAS: A DISTRICT'S VISION TO SERVE VIETNAMESE-SPEAKING EMERGENT BILINGUAL STUDENTS

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Home languages are often considered to be a deficit for students, and many educational programs have ignored students' first language in favor of the dominant language in society: English. Contrary to this belief, much research illustrates that instead of a deficit, a child's native language is an asset that goes beyond the linguistic domain, and is a direct and deep



connection to one's family, culture, history, and identity (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). In public schools across Texas, the shift from language as a problem has given space to recognize students' language as a resource, and ultimately their right (Ruiz, 1984), resulting in utilizing and viewing a student's native language as an asset to bring into the classroom.

According to the American Community Survey (2017), in Texas, more than 8 million individuals over the age of five speak a language other than English at home. The survey included more than 39 identified languages. The trend shows that the number of individuals over the age of five who speak another language at home is increasing and Spanish represents the second most popular language other than English spoken at home with Vietnamese representing the third. Because of the great linguistic diversity in Texas, the creation of programs that promote multilingualism is a priority as districts continue to move towards multilingual ideologies as an asset for emergent bilinguals in their educational trajectory.

In North Texas, Keller ISD is a district that recognized the need to start a Vietnamese-English Bilingual program in 2006. I interviewed Mara Betancourt Coker, director of the Language Acquisition Department, to learn about their program and highlight their experience at a district level. Keller ISD serves 34,999 students and has a growing number of emergent bilinguals. Indeed, 8.8% of the district's population (3,084 students) are served through the Language Acquisition Department according to the Texas Education Agency's (2019) Academic Performance Report. There is much we can learn from the Keller ISD program as evidenced in an overview of our conversation below.

STARTING A VIETNAMESE-ENGLISH BILINGUAL PROGRAM

A native language serves as a resource for emergent bilinguals. Instead of being an obstacle to be overcome, when multilingualism is promoted and accepted in the classroom, students' academic achievement increases, as their education embraces their linguistic, cultural, and social assets. In Keller ISD, they created a Vietnamese-English Late Transitional program to serve the increasingly diverse population in the district. The first Vietnamese bilingual teacher was hired to teach in the district's first-ever Kindergarten Vietnamese-English classroom in the 2006-2007 school year. The challenge was to find a qualified teacher who spoke Vietnamese, held a teacher certification, and had a heart for kids. The Vietnamese-English Bilingual Program remained an Early Exit program for an extended time due to the hardships of finding qualified teachers. However, the program has now evolved to a Late Transitional program, as it serves students from prekindergarten to sixth grade. The community has embraced the bilingual program, as they have witnessed how utilizing their children's native language in their education has benefited their academic achievement. Betancourt Coker states: "Our teachers have done such a phenomenal job that we have parents asking if there is any chance that their younger child can benefit from [the program], just like their siblings did. To me that is the biggest testament of what a wonderful job they have done."



STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAM

From its inception, Keller ISD has prided itself in implementing the Vietnamese-English program methodically and systematically, focusing on the quality of instruction and employing teachers who wholeheartedly embrace the mission of utilizing a student's home language as a resource. The structure reflects the program that the district has adopted for the One-Way Dual Language Model for Spanish-speaking students. This model creates a language-rich environment for students; for example, in the Vietnamese-English classroom, green is the designated color for words in Vietnamese and blue for English. Because Vietnamese-English programs are only starting to emerge, resources that can be utilized as tools for the instruction of Vietnamese are not readily available. Even though the difficulty of finding materials in Vietnamese presents a challenge, the vision and mission of Keller ISD to provide an effective bilingual program remain a priority.

The mission of Keller ISD's Language Acquisition Department is to support the three pillars of dual-language programs: high academic achievement, development of bilingualism and biliteracy in both languages, and sociocultural competence. The goal of the program is for the student to acquire English, "but also [we are] trying to keep their bilingualism and their biculturalism alive," said Betancourt Coker.

LESSONS FROM KELLER ISD

School districts in Texas have the impetus to embrace asset-based bilingual programs that are strongly supported by the benefits of bilingualism and the need to provide equitable educational opportunities for all students. In Keller ISD, the goal to serve the influx of students who would benefit from Vietnamese instruction began in meetings that set forth a clear, purposeful direction to begin such a program. Cross-departmental collaboration has been pivotal in providing teachers, students, and the community a clear mission of the program, the approach, and the importance of educating the child holistically. Teachers also receive continuous training and opportunities for their professional growth that allow them to have a well-defined approach in the implementation of bilingual programs. Yet the responsibility of fulfilling the goals of bilingual education does not only fall on the bilingual teachers, but it is the responsibility of ALL teachers to promote and advocate for emergent bilingual students. Betancourt Coker reminds us of the mission for ALL educators: "That's my plea for all educators that are not bilingual. Just tell your families it is okay. You should be reading to your child in your language, and you should be using your language at home."

Keller ISD has identified a need for their students and community and has opened the door not only for the acquisition of English, but the opportunity for their student body to learn about other cultures and celebrate diversity. Furthermore, it has integrated and promoted a primary goal of sociocultural competence for all students, teachers, and the community at large.

Keller ISD's Vietnamese-English program has set the precedent of future asset-based bilingual programs will require in the future. The state of Texas is rich in multilingualism and this is



represented in our school systems, creating the impetus to provide the best educational opportunities for all students through bilingual education. The need for embracing bilingual programs beyond Spanish will be the norm. In Keller ISD, conversations have started as the community diversifies. Serving students whose home language is Nepali has them thinking about the need for a Nepali-English program.

TOWARD MULTILINGUALISM IN TEXAS

We are shifting from a bilingual to a multilingual approach to serving emergent bilingual students in Texas. School districts need to identify the growing linguistic diversity in the community and provide opportunities for emergent bilinguals who would benefit from the creation of asset-based dual language programs that embrace all languages. These programs strengthen our multilingual communities. Betancourt Coker reminds us that the daily work of advocating for emergent bilinguals' rights to their home language in our school system is an obligation for all educators. We need to work against deficit language ideologies and recognize the bravery in the journey towards bilingualism and biliteracy of emergent bilingual students in Texas.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ivonne J. Solano is a fourth-grade dual language teacher in a two-way dual language program in Denton ISD. She teaches English Language Arts and Spanish Language Arts. She is an advocate for culturally sustaining pedagogies to create equitable dual language programs for all emergent bilingual students. She is pursuing her doctorate in Reading Education with an emphasis in bilingualism and biliteracy through her participation in Project PIONERAS grant (Professional Improvement through Optimization of Native-language Education and the Realization of Academic/familial Symbiosis) at



Texas Woman's University. Her research interests center on critical issues in the educational trajectories of Latinx students in the P-16 pipeline, implementation of two-way dual language programs, translanguaging, critical literacies, and language ideologies. Her passion for education and advocacy efforts stems from her own experiences as a first-generation, emergent bilingual student growing up at the Juarez/El Paso border.