

Becoming Sociocultural Mediators

What All Educators Can Learn
from Bilingual and ESL Teachers

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In the past several decades, those who speak languages other than English have become a growing presence in the United States, even in areas where they had not previously been concentrated. In fact, in the past three decades their numbers have almost tripled, from 23 to 60 million (Gándara, 2015). U.S. schools have felt the major impact of this growing population. Currently, about 9.1 percent, or 4.4 million students in U.S. classrooms, are classified as ELLs (English Language Learners), or emergent bilinguals (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).¹

Many emergent bilingual students, although not all, are immigrants or refugees; others were born in the United States and speak only, or primarily, their native language until they arrive at school. Although some are in bilingual and ESL classrooms with teachers who have gained the necessary knowledge and expertise to teach them, many are in regular English-medium classrooms. Some receive no special language assistance at all. The growing numbers of emergent bilingual students make it imperative that all teachers learn how to competently teach them. Yet, over 80 percent of U.S. teachers are White, monolingual English speakers. A good number have had little or no training in how to teach these students, and many have had limited experience with diversity, including language diversity (Aud et al, 2012).

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On the bright side, most bilingual and ESL teachers have received the necessary preparation for working with the growing number of emergent bilingual students. Mining the knowledge and practices of these teachers means learning from what they value and what they do. In this article, I focus specifically on how what I call non-specialist teachers (i.e., those who are neither bilingual nor ESL teachers) can benefit from the practices of bilingual and ESL teachers, and how teacher educators can incorporate this knowledge in their curriculum and pedagogy. To do so, I use examples from research I have done over many years to examine how bilingual and ESL teachers engage with students of diverse language backgrounds through curriculum, pedagogy, outreach to families, and engagement in the community (Nieto, 1999; Nieto, 2005; Nieto, 2013; Nieto, 2015).

There are two major lessons that non-specialist teachers of emergent bilingual students can learn from bilingual and ESL teachers: one is that they need to learn certain bodies of knowledge, and the other is that they need to build bridges with their students by developing affirming dispositions about language, culture, and difference. My examples come from teachers who teach students of diverse language backgrounds at different grade levels and in a variety of settings around the country. Next, I give some examples of non-specialist teachers who embody some of these lessons from bilingual and ESL teachers. I end the article with what this information implies for teacher education.

Learning to Teach Emergent Bilingual Students

Bilingual and ESL teachers have to learn an impressive amount to be successful with students of diverse language backgrounds. They need to learn, for instance, about first and second language acquisition. They need to become familiar with research in language education that points to effective practices and policies. They need to learn how to work effectively with families. They need to learn sociocultural knowledge about the students they teach. Some of this knowledge comes from their studies, and some of it is developed as a result of their work in the classroom. Some examples follow.

Becoming Resources for Non-Specialist Teachers

There are many ways in which bilingual and ESL teachers can become resources for their non-specialist colleagues. For example, several teachers I've interviewed over the years have mentioned that a good number of the non-specialist teachers with whom they work know little about their students' trajectory as second language learners. These teachers may incorrectly think, for instance, that learning another language is a

fairly quick and painless process, that it takes just some grammar and vocabulary lessons before students are ready to enter a “mainstream” classroom. Obviously, this misperception is even built into state and federal laws that mandate a quick transition—generally a year—from limited English knowledge to English-only classrooms.

A group of bilingual, dual language, and ESL teachers I interviewed in California several years ago described how they served as resources for their colleagues. Many of the teachers had themselves been immigrants and they understood in a visceral way what their students go through. For these teachers, being resources for their colleagues meant serving as models, either through their teaching practices or in their relationships with students and families. In the specific case of teachers working with Latino/a students, Leticia Ornelas spoke about the responsibility of Latino/a teachers to speak up when other staff members expressed negative ideas about the students and their families. Leticia said, “That’s us! That’s the way that we grew up!” (Nieto, 2013, p. 86). She said she didn’t remember her own parents going to any parent meetings, or even understanding the reasons for doing so, but she explained this didn’t mean they didn’t value education. In fact, the opposite is true: many immigrants realize that education is their only way out and they constantly remind their children of this fact. This support for education is something all teachers need to understand.

Another teacher, Angela Fajardo, brought up the many sacrifices that families make so that their children can get a good education. “Our students’ parents work in hotels; they work at the airport. They have night shifts. How can you tell me these parents don’t care when they are working all hours for their children?” (Nieto, 2013, p. 86). Explaining these things to their colleagues, Leticia said, might help them be more understanding and sensitive. This can happen through activities as simple as hallway conversations when non-specialist teachers might have questions, or in more formal settings such as professional development sessions in which bilingual and ESL teachers share their knowledge and experiences. It can also happen through newsletters and other less formal activities.

Building Bridges

One of the most significant roles a teacher can have is being a bridge, that is, connecting students’ worlds of home and school in meaningful and constructive ways. A bridge is a good metaphor for teachers’ work as sociocultural mediators. A bridge helps connect two areas that otherwise might be hard to reach. A bridge also introduces us to new terrains and new adventures. In addition, a bridge makes going back and forth easy. Rather

than the expectation that students need to “burn their bridges”—that is, forget and reject their native language and ethnic culture—they can instead become bilingual and bicultural. When teachers act as bridges, they send a message to their students that their identities are worthwhile. This is a valuable disposition for all teachers to have.

Dispositions are values put into practice. They do not come as a pre-packaged curriculum, nor are they a specific pedagogy or set of strategies. Dispositions are also not about creating a “feel-good” curriculum or lowering standards. Dispositions—although not easily taught—can nevertheless be learned through experience and practice. These dispositions include being open to learning about their students, having empathy and solidarity for them, being respectful of their families and communities, and having a passion for social justice; dispositions I have written about in a previous book (Nieto, 2013). For many bilingual and ESL teachers, these kinds of dispositions are often second nature, sometimes because of their own lives as immigrants, at other times because of their personal experiences with diversity, their work in different cultural settings, or in other ways. Developing these dispositions can go a long way in creating strong bonds of caring and respect between teachers and students.

More than anything else, becoming a competent teacher of emergent bilingual students means learning to be a sociocultural mediator, that is, using students’ cultures and language to open new possibilities for them *while at the same time* supporting their emerging bilingualism and biculturalism rather than forcing them to what Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut have called a “premature assimilation” (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). This is easier said than done, especially for teachers who have had little personal or professional experience with students of diverse language backgrounds. Becoming a sociocultural mediator entails two different, but complementary, practices: first, it means taking students someplace else—in the case of emergent bilinguals, teaching them English and helping them adapt to the culture and traditions of their new country; and second, it means encouraging them to honor what they already know and who they are. In essence, this means eschewing the assimilation imperative and instead, in the words of Margaret Gibson, teaching them “accommodation without assimilation” (Gibson, 1988). A few examples from bilingual and ESL teachers follow.

Strengthening Academic and Personal Bonds

Bilingual and ESL teachers know all too well that forging strong relationships with students is essential if students are to connect with school and learning. A number of years ago I interviewed Angeles Perez, a 4th grade bilingual teacher in the Sheldon Independent School District

in Houston, Texas. Angeles was her students' "biggest fan," she said unapologetically. She worked hard at cultivating the teacher-student relationship both academically and socially. For example, she helped her students develop their own learning goals, saying, "I pride myself on getting them to set their goals and they're not low goals, they're high goals" (Nieto, 2013, p. 39). She was thrilled when her students reached their goals, and then she helped them set new goals. Angeles pushed her students hard and they reaped the benefits of her demands when, for instance, one of her students won the school Spelling Bee—in English—unprecedented for a student in a bilingual class.

Angeles also created strong bonds with her students on a personal level. No student in her class remained invisible. She made it a point, for instance, to stand by the door each morning to greet each student personally. At the end of the day, she said, "they run to give me a hug and it's the best feeling because they care so much about me. They work for me because they know I work for them. I love them" (Nieto, 2013, p. 38). But it's often just little things that count. Angeles also instituted "hanging out with Ms. Perez time" for the last ten minutes of the school day as a way to learn more about each student's interests and experiences.

A number of humorous examples of building bridges come from some of the ESL and bilingual teachers I interviewed several years ago in the Los Angeles area. Leticia Ornelas, a bilingual teacher in the Montebello school district in California, arrived from Mexico when she was a child. She spoke about building bridges with her students in numerous ways. She explained that she had instituted something she called "Lotion Day" in her classroom on Fridays, saying,

My skin gets dry, so I put lotion on, and because kids notice everything you do, one day they said, "You know, you don't share your lotion with us." I said, "Oh, no! You didn't notice that!" So I said, "You want some of my lotion?" and they said, "Yeah!" (Nieto, 2013, p. 84)

She continued, "So I gave it to a little girl, and now I have this long line of students every Friday." A simple gesture as seemingly insignificant as sharing lotion with one's students can go a long way in relating to them, especially students new to this country who may see their teachers as unapproachable.

Angela Fajardo also had a humorous example of building bridges. She spoke about a group of students who hadn't passed the California exit exam. Exasperated, one day she asked them, "What do I have to do for you to learn this?" They were quick to respond, "Feed us, just feed us!" (Nieto, 2013, p. 86). Thereafter, Angela kept a stocked refrigerator and a microwave in her classroom. The metaphor of food as sustenance

is an apt one because food is a tangible demonstration of a commitment to nurturing students' intellects, bodies, and souls.

Unlike the other ESL and bilingual teachers featured until now, Nina Tepper, who recently retired after many years in the classroom, is not Hispanic. But as an ESL teacher, she learned early on that ESL and bilingual teachers are most successful when they draw on students' cultural backgrounds and experiences to make learning more meaningful. This meant that she needed to learn about the students she taught, about their identities, their communities, and their realities.

Nina wrote about many of the strategies she used to bring students' lives into the curriculum and pedagogy. She often asked students to write about themselves and, in an essay she wrote shortly after retiring, she recounted the final author party in her classroom in which students had written essays about an important lesson they had learned in their lives. Through tears and laughter, and knowing they were in a safe space, the students described significant incidents they might not have been able to talk about elsewhere. She wrote, "Each story is unique and each story tells of the complicated lives with which our students come to us. Without searching for their stories, I would never have known, and what assumptions might I have made?" (Tepper, 2015, p. 37).

Nina also wrote about having her students imagine the future and their role in it by bringing *all* of themselves into it without having to completely change who they are. This is another key lesson for non-specialist teachers to learn, that is, that students' cultures should be viewed as an asset rather than as a deficit or something to be discarded because in this way, they can envision themselves as significant players in the future. In her essay, Nina wrote,

When teachers validate each child's culture and experience, when teachers inject facts and stories that connect the past and present to the future, when teachers design real opportunities for students to work collectively with others, students can then explore how their lives are woven into the fabric of society and begin to imagine how they too can contribute to our world (Tepper, 2015).

Validating students' experiences in school sounds simple enough to do, but given the current focus on accountability, standardization, and rigid pre-packaged curricula that has swept the nation in the past three decades, it can be difficult to accomplish. Teachers must find ways to bring students' experiences and realities into school, sometimes putting aside school or district mandates, instead using creative approaches to integrating these issues into the curriculum.

Non-Specialist Teachers Learning from Bilingual and ESL Teachers

We have seen several examples of what bilingual and ESL teachers value and what they do to create strong bonds—academic and personal—with their students. What can other teachers learn from them?

Starting Where Kids Are At

A veteran of 42 years in the classroom, Mary Ginley, now retired, taught students of all backgrounds both in Massachusetts and in Florida: children of privilege in a wealthy community, immigrant children in an impoverished community, and children of diverse backgrounds in a socioeconomically mixed community. Through it all, she has thought long and hard about what it means to reach all her students. In a journal entry she wrote for a class she took with me in the 1990s, Mary pondered how to be an effective teacher for all her students. At the time, she was teaching in a socioeconomically disadvantaged community with a growing Puerto Rican population. As the excellent teacher she always was, Mary questioned her own awareness and understanding:

My philosophy has always been—start from where they are and go together to someplace else. Still, when more and more Puerto Rican children entered my classroom, I had trouble starting from where they were, because I didn't know where they were and it was hard for them to tell me (Ginley, 1999a, p. 75).

Mary was always introspective, an important quality in teachers working with students who are not like them. Being introspective means constantly questioning what one is doing, and whether it is enough to reach all students. As Mary progressed in her understanding of her growing Puerto Rican student body, she mused,

Every child needs to feel welcome, to feel comfortable. School is a foreign land to most kids (where else in the world would you spend time circling answers and filling in the blanks?), but the more distant a child's culture and language are from the culture and language of school, the more at risk that child is. (Ginley, 1999b, p. 85-86)

That is, rather than using the term “at risk” to blame families, children, and culture, she correctly placed the onus of being “at risk” on schools and society in general. And although she agreed that it's important for teachers to be warm, friendly, and nice, she also discovered that it wasn't enough because,

We have plenty of warm friendly teachers who tell the kids nicely to forget their Spanish and ask mommy and daddy to speak to them in

English at home; who give them easier tasks so they won't feel badly when the work becomes difficult; who never learn about what life is like at home or what they eat or what music they like or what stories they have been told or what their history is. Instead, we smile and tell them to listen to our stories and dance to our music. We teach them to read with our words and wonder why it's so hard for them. We ask them to sit quietly and we'll tell them what's important and what they must know to "get ready for the next grade." And we never ask them who they are and where they want to go (Ginley, 1999b, p. 86).

Mary Ginley's powerful caution that being nice is not enough is an important reminder to all teachers that learning about students and their communities is essential for all teachers, not just specialists in ESL and bilingual education. The kinds of dispositions Mary developed through her many years of teaching also demonstrate that knowledge of second language acquisition, cultural difference, and the sociopolitical context of education are all key areas of learning for non-specialist teachers who work with emergent bilingual students.

Learning Another Language

One lesson from bilingual and ESL teachers is to learn the native language of their students. But why should non-bilingual and non-ESL teachers learn another language? After all, they aren't expected to teach in a language other than English, and also they may have few emergent bilingual students in their classes. Also, it is not always practical for them to learn another language, especially if they have a number of languages represented in their classroom. Nevertheless, teachers can at the very least learn key vocabulary in several of the languages their students speak, and they can label objects in the room with these languages. They can also encourage their same-language students to work together in small groups, using their native languages to do some of their work. This can be a good transition to an all-English classroom, as well as a significant message that their language is worthwhile and important for them to keep using. Stocking the classroom library with books in a variety of languages gives the same message, as is encouraging the school librarian to do the same.

There are other good reasons for learning another language. Bill Dunn, a teacher of English and social studies at a vocational high school in Massachusetts, provides a powerful example of why it's important for non-specialist teachers to learn another language. Bill, a former student of mine, had experienced vicarious second language learning over a couple of decades as a result of his school district undergoing a dramatic increase in the number of Spanish-speaking students in the

city (Dunn, 1999). Bill decided, he said, to “come out of the closet as a Spanish speaker,” because he realized he was understanding a great deal of what his Spanish-speaking students were saying. Thus began Bill’s journey to learn the language. He immersed himself in it, taking a class, watching TV shows, reading the Spanish language newspaper, and sitting in on a bilingual class in his school. He also kept a journal documenting his experiences.

Bill was frustrated and disappointed when he took a test in Spanish in a bilingual class in his school and couldn’t answer most of the questions. What really shocked him, he said, was that he didn’t understand two-thirds of the questions. Always a thoughtful and caring teacher, Bill became a more effective and understanding one as well because, being in the position of a second-language learner, he began to understand what his students went through. He wrote, “I thought of all those kids in the lower tracks who are condemned to answering questions that they don’t understand at the end of countless chapters that they don’t comprehend” (Dunn, 1999, pp. 150). Bill became restless, began to take books from the shelf, wanted to talk to his neighbors and, because he became very tired, even contemplated putting his head on the desk. Bill began to understand these and other behaviors of his students who were learning English.

Another benefit of Bill’s foray into learning Spanish was that he began to understand and appreciate the Puerto Rican community and Spanish speakers in ways he hadn’t before. He wrote,

[There] are things about Puerto Rican people and culture that I admire very much. I would also have to admit that I did not always admire these things because I did not understand them at first. This is a good lesson not only for second-language learning but for any situation where different cultures come in contact. It takes time to build understanding (Dunn, 1999, p. 151).

At the end of the semester, Bill wrote, “I now know from personal experience that second-language acquisition is a slow and difficult process, yet in most American schools we demand that nonnative-English speakers achieve fluency in a short period of time” (Dunn, 2010, p. 174). This kind of understanding is not always easy to come by, but learning a second language is almost guaranteed to make it happen.

Developing Solidarity With Students

A high school English teacher in Athens, Georgia, a state that has seen an unprecedented increase in its Latino immigrant population in the past three decades, Matt Hicks wrote about his dawning awareness of the difficult daily experiences faced by his undocumented immigrant

students. “Over time,” he wrote in an essay in my most recent book (Nieto, 2015), “I became more and more conscious of their status-specific struggles” (Hicks, 2015, p. 132). As both a teacher and coach, Matt was becoming more engaged in their lives. He also began to welcome—and learn from—conversations about his students’ experiences. As a result, he became an activist, attending rallies with his students to protest, for example, Georgia House Bill 87, modeled after Arizona’s SB 1070, the most restrictive state legislation against the immigration of undocumented people into the United States.

Matt also worked inside the school to create spaces of inclusion for students who have generally been excluded. One of his students, Uma, worked with Matt to create a guide that provided students and their advocates with information about colleges to which they could apply, as well as available scholarships, admissions questions, and more. As the state’s Latino immigrant student population increased, including the number of undocumented youngsters, he sent the guide to counselors around the state.

In another move to advocate for his students, Matt asked Uma to help him use the school’s enrichment period to teach a class from the guide. “We gave the course a vague, innocuous name,” he wrote, “and from there we used our relationships with other kids to bring together 15 aspiring, college-bound, undocumented students...” (Hicks, 2015, p. 134). At the end of the year, seven of the students who took the class were admitted to at least one college, no small feat for students who are generally excluded from attending college because of a lack of access to in-state tuition and financial aid. Three students earned 6 scholarships, an even greater accomplishment. Matt’s engagement led him to become a strong advocate for his undocumented students. He explained how his engagement extended beyond his curriculum and pedagogy; it was about “coming into full humanity,” the title he gave his essay:

This work was more than just something I made plans for each week. It was no longer an abstraction or intellectual pursuit. It was close to my heart each night as I prepared for school. It was what brought me there each day. These kids brought me there each day (Hicks, 2015, p. 135)

Implications for Teacher Education

Although different in many ways, the teachers whose stories illuminate this article developed academic and personal relationships with their students by:

- Engaging their students in conversations about their identities and realities

- Creating curricula centered on their students' lives
- Developing a caring pedagogy
- Promoting respectful relationships with family members and communities
- Understanding that it is not only what they teach, but also whom they teach that matters

The experiences of the teachers highlighted in this article also suggest a number of lessons for teacher education and professional development. Teacher educators and professional developers can change some of the courses they teach to include the kind of content that bilingual and ESL teachers must learn to gain teacher certification. They can, for instance, require that all teachers, not just those preparing to specialize in bilingual and ESL education, take courses that include linguistics, first and second language acquisition, culture, and family outreach and relationships. They can also require practicum activities such as learning how to connect with students' families and caregivers, learning about and visiting social service agencies and other community organizations, and attending school board meetings. These and other related activities, although not identical to the preparation of bilingual and ESL teachers, will at least give non-specialist teachers more of the knowledge they need to be successful teachers of emergent bilingual students.

In addition, although teachers' values and dispositions cannot necessarily be taught, they can be learned. In their professional development, most bilingual and ESL teachers learn about creating learning environments that focus on inclusive and nurturing practices, and that embody high expectations. Rather than offer only courses with a singular focus on methods—although some methods courses are necessary—courses that focus on respectful and caring relationships, outreach to families, and the sociocultural realities of the children with which they will be working can help future and practicing teachers learn about their students and the communities in which they teach in more meaningful ways.

Taking courses in other departments besides education is also essential. Naturally, courses in the discipline they plan to teach are fundamental, but to give students a broader perspective, equally important are courses in history, literature, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and other arts and the social sciences. In addition, preservice teachers should be given the opportunity to have extended and relevant field experiences in the kinds of communities in which they will be working. These experiences, rather than solidify existing biases – as long as

they're combined with critical discussions and other experiences in their teacher education programs—can help challenge biases.

Finally, preparing future teachers to work in collaboration with specialist teachers in ESL and bilingual education can put them in good stead for the realities of today's classrooms where more than ever, emergent bilingual students will be a big part. Instead of isolating ESL and bilingual teachers into tracks that never connect with other preservice teachers, the goal should be to have them together with non-specialist teachers as much as possible.

Conclusion

It is unfortunately too often the case that emergent bilingual students feel alienated and invisible in English-medium classrooms (Bartlett & Garcia, 2011). This is not the way it has to be, however. With the help of specialists who work with emergent bilingual students, namely, ESL and bilingual teachers, other educators can learn important lessons about how to go about teaching and reaching emergent bilingual students.

The changes needed to help emergent bilingual students transition into English-medium classrooms are about both policy and practice. Policies include making time for other staff members to learn about what it takes to teach emergent bilinguals, developing outreach efforts with families, providing the resources (books and other materials) that teachers need to use with these students, and others. Naturally, administrators, policymakers, teacher educators, and the general public need to do the lion's share of changing the policies that make it difficult for all students to feel a sense of power and inclusion in our public schools. Classroom practices, however, are mainly the purview of teachers who, in spite of rigid curricular mandates, can nevertheless make meaningful changes in their classrooms. Teachers often believe they have little power to make change, but all educators can take solace from the teachers highlighted in this article as well as many others like them, to understand that they too can make a substantive difference in the lives of their students through their curricula, pedagogy, outreach efforts, and activism.

The stories in this article illustrate what can happen when teachers, working in tandem with students, families, colleagues, administrators, and others – and sometimes even when working alone—take seriously the challenge to provide young people of all backgrounds with the kinds of affirming practices too often missing in our nation's classrooms and schools.

Note

¹ In this article, I use the term *emergent bilinguals* instead because it focuses on what students can become rather than on what they do not know (Bartlett & García, 2011).

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