



Welcoming Students as “Full Vessels”

LEARNING TO SEE ELL STUDENTS WITH FRESH EYES

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—Marsha Riddle Buly

Schools across the US are becoming more diverse, with more bilingual students speaking a wider variety of home languages in the classroom, says **Marsha Riddle Buly**, a literacy and bilingual education professor at Western Washington University.

“For teachers who have been around a long time, it has been a shift in the last 10 to 15 years to recognize, ‘Wow, I have a lot of language learners in my classroom, how can I support that?’” Riddle Buly says.

MOVING AWAY FROM THE DEFICIT MODEL

Fresh out of her teacher training at WWU three decades ago, Riddle Buly found herself in a first- and second-grade classroom in southern California where more than half of her students spoke Spanish or another second language at home.

“I knew nothing about what I needed to support that,” she says.

In her book *English Language Learners in Literacy Workshops* (bit.ly/ELL-book_Buly), she describes how she moved from seeing her students through a “deficit” lens to understanding that they came to her classroom with preexisting language knowledge that she could build into her teaching.

“I think historically we’ve looked at kids who spoke a language other than English when they came through the door, as, ‘Oh no, a language learner, I’ve got to teach them everything,’” she says.

In the past, immigrant students and their parents were pushed to drop their home language and replace it with English. Now, she says, the push is to support students in their home language and build on the literacies they bring to the classroom.

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Riddle Buly outlines many simple ways mainstream teachers can create a welcoming classroom that affirms and builds on students’ bilingual abilities. Some strategies she’s modeled with teachers in K–5 classrooms include:

- Asking students to deliver a morning greeting in their home language and teach each other a few words.
- Stocking bilingual books in the classroom and putting up posters on classroom walls and school hallways in students’ home languages.
- Encouraging students to work on projects in the language in which they are most fluent, with the understanding that the final product will be in English.
- Sending books home with blank sticky notes and having students fill in the words with their parents in their home language.
- Having older students write books with younger students in their heritage languages, so they’re building vocabulary.
- If students are stuck on a word, helping them find resources, including other students, another adult, or an online translation program such as Google Translate or Babelfish, so they can focus on the concept the class is discussing.

“One of the huge things to reinforce with parents is that they should be speaking their home language at home,” Riddle Buly says. She encourages parents to read, write notes, and have complex conversations with their children in their strongest language to build student vocabulary and language skills.

“Sometimes the hardest place to communicate that is to parents,” she says.

Nationwide, English language learners make up about 10 percent of the student population, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Large urban school districts, and states with large immigrant populations, like California and Texas, have had years to develop bilingual and ELL programs. (<http://bit.ly/2vvJiMW>)

But the biggest growth in recent years has been in the South. And many rural and suburban school districts are newly grappling with the challenge of working with ELLs, a National Public Radio analysis of the NCES data found. (<http://n.pr/2tz9hSg>)



Marsha Riddle Buly (standing at center) meets with future bilingual teachers in the Bilingual Teacher Fellows program at Western Washington University, as they create materials to use with emerging bilinguals. Read a recent Slate.com article on this program: <http://slate.me/2vaGdmn>.

“They’ve been sold on this idea of assimilation”—that if they want their children to learn English, the children should be immersed in that language as much as possible.

“What we know from the research is that kids *can* learn two languages at one time,” she says. “We used to think they were separate parts of the brain, that they couldn’t learn from one another. Now we know that’s not true.”

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