Dr. Yvonne (Bonnie) Freeman and Dr. David Freeman are Professors Emeriti at the University of Texas at Brownsville working in the fields of literacy, biliteracy, ESL, and bilingual education. For the past 25 years, the Freemans have researched and published together, worked with teachers nationally and internationally, and presented regularly at international, national, and state conferences. They see their role as helping teachers put theory and research into practice in the classroom. Together and independently, the Freemans have published numerous articles and 12 books, including Academic Language for English Language Learners and Struggling Readers; Teaching Reading and Writing in Spanish and English in Bilingual and Dual Language Classrooms; Essential Linguistics: What You Need to Know to Teach Reading, ESL, Spelling, Phonics, and Grammar; and Between Worlds: Access to Second Language Acquisition, which received the Mildenberger Award from the Modern Language Association for outstanding research in the field of foreign and second language teaching.

This interview was recorded on October 29, 2013, and has been edited for publication. The full interview is available as a podcast at http://www.ncte.org/journals/la/podcasts/january-2014-outstanding.

LA: It’s our pleasure to talk with Drs. Yvonne (Bonnie) and David Freeman, Professors Emeriti at the University of Texas Brownsville, recipients of NCTE’s 2013 Outstanding Educators in the English Language Arts Award. Congratulations on receiving this wonderful and deserved award!

BF: For a long time, we have been trying to bring second language issues to NCTE, and we feel that this award supports the importance of what we’re now calling “emergent bilingual students” in our schools. This award supports them tremendously, it doesn’t just honor us.

LA: Will you tell us how you started studying English learners?

BF: Well, we actually met in graduate school; David was studying to be an English teacher and I was studying to be a Spanish teacher. We fell in love, got married, and decided that since David had never been to Mexico that we would go there for our honeymoon. David loved that experience. A couple years after we had begun our teaching careers, we decided to be adventurous and spend a year teaching in Colombia. That was an experience that helped us understand what it was like to be totally immersed in a culture that’s not yours. David did not speak Spanish and struggled to communicate.

Once we returned to California, I got involved in teaching adult ESL; we had refugees from Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and students from all over the world. We became involved with these students, and David loved this experience. So while he taught high school English during the day, he taught ESL at night. We then decided to go to Mexico to teach ESL and took our two young daughters because we didn’t know much about language acquisition. We decided that the best way to teach language is to immerse somebody in the language. We’ve learned a lot more since then.

LA: The two of you have written a great deal about literacy and second language acqui-
sition. Will you talk about this combination of
interests?

**DF:** This is a somewhat unusual combina-
tion, but we had both been very interested in
second language. We both had masters degrees
in TESOL from the University of Arizona, and
Bonnie went on and worked with Ken and Yetta
Goodman there studying for a Ph.D. in reading.
At the same time, I was working on linguistics,
and did my dissertation on miscue analysis;
Ken was my dissertation director. What really
got us combining the two areas was a paper we
wrote for Ken that became the basis for our first
Learners.* Ever since then, we’ve combined our
interests in literacy with our interest in how one
learns a second language.

**LA:** What do you see as the most critical
issues for emergent bilingual students in our
schools today?

**BF:** I think educating second language
learners is so misunderstood in this country.
Bilingual education has been attacked even
though we have had bilingual education in this
country from the beginning. There were Ger-
man schools, Italian schools—all over the east
and into the Midwest and even into Texas—but
it’s never been really understood or accepted
by those who were not bilingual themselves,
and sometimes not by bilingual people. Yet, the
research has consistently shown us that when
students develop first languages, they do much
better in learning other languages. The common
sense idea is, we shouldn’t be doing anything for
these kids; we should just throw them in to “sink
or swim.” More English is thought to be better
because more English logically would equal
more English learning, but in reality, the more
we support students’ first languages, the better
they do academically in English.

Another key issue is that our immigrant
students are frequently clustered together in
impoverished schools with other students like
them. Very seldom are immigrant students ex-
posed to what we would call, I suppose, middle
class America. This has been written about by
Gándara and Contreras in *The Latino Educa-
tion Crisis.* They say that unless we begin to
educate all immigrant students, there will be an
economic crisis in this country. What we need to
do is make sure that we provide good bilingual
education taught by teachers who know about
emergent bilinguals and their needs, and include
good literacy education.

**LA:** Who has influenced your work?

**DF:** Particularly in our more recent work,
Francois Grosjean, a sociolinguist, made a
point that really struck me: a bilingual person
is not two monolinguals in one body. One of
the problems with looking at a bilingual as two
monolinguals is that we tend to test them as two
monolinguals—they should have high scores in
two languages. His work has opened our eyes.

Ofelia Garcia is another who has influ-
enced our work. She coined the term “emergent
bilinguals” and has talked a lot about “trans-
languaging.” She argues that we don’t actually
have a language. She uses *language* as a verb;
we “language.” In other words, you have to use
language. We have a language resource we can
draw on, and that’s the combination of any and
all languages that we can use. Those ideas have
really stopped and made us think. For example,
now we would say that in a dual-language
bilingual program, you don’t have to keep the
languages totally separate at all times. That’s
like separating reading and writing. It doesn’t
really make a lot of sense.

**BF:** Two other people have influenced us in
the area of second language acquisition, Stephen
Krashen and Jim Cummins. Jim Cummins has
been misunderstood quite often; people have
quoted him as saying *you must always keep the
languages separate,* but, in fact, he has written
convincingly about the importance of always
drawing on the first language and including both
languages in instruction at all times.

**DF:** I might just add one last book that had
a strong influence on us by Suárez-Orozco,
Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova called *Learning a
New Land.* It was an incredible study of ado-
lescent immigrants done on a large scale, and it
shows the difficult circumstances many of these
kids live in.

**BF:** They talk about the toxic schools that
students are put into, and they also deal with lots
of different immigrant groups. The authors don’t
just talk about Spanish-speaking students, but
students from all different language backgrounds
and cultural backgrounds.
**LA:** That’s a really nice segue into our next question. You’ve lived in Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela, and have spent time in Lithuania, Jakarta, and Hong Kong. How have these international experiences impacted you personally and professionally?

**DF:** For me, Colombia was a bit of a culture shock because I didn’t speak any Spanish and lived with a family that didn’t speak any English. I went through all sorts of things that I think kids do, like not wanting to speak the language, not even wanting my wife to teach me the language. But I think that, in general, what it really has done for us to go to these different places, especially places like Lithuania or Jakarta where we didn’t speak the language, was to get some empathy with students we’ve worked with who are really struggling, because we certainly struggled, not only with the language but also with some of our cultural beliefs.

I remember walking down the street to the university in Lithuania and seeing a blue-eyed, blond woman in her early twenties sweeping the streets. I commented to Bonnie, “She must be a college student,” because it was inconceivable to me, until I stopped to think about it, that this could be a normal job for a white person. In the United States, that would really stand out as something unusual, I guess. But it kind of caught me up short. In general, I think this has really helped us understand ESL (English as a second language) and EFL (English as a foreign language) and some of the similarities and differences in teaching in those different settings.

**BF:** I would add one other example. We lived a year in Venezuela where we were Fulbright Scholars. There we both spoke the language, and I really was pretty fluent. One of the things I learned related to the social cultural interactions. I found myself trying to interact with other faculty because I understood what they were saying and what they were talking about. But I would quite often enter a conversation and suddenly the conversation would stop, or I’d get weird looks. I began to understand how difficult it is for someone—even someone who speaks the language quite well—to enter in and become part of a culture and become an accepted part. So I think that’s really helped me understand at a much deeper level what second language learners, even at an advanced level of knowing English, have to struggle with.

**LA:** The two of you were professors in both Fresno, California, and on the Mexico-Texas border. How have living and working in these areas influenced your academic work?

**BF:** We lived in Fresno at a time when there were over one hundred different languages represented in the schools. This helped us move beyond working with Spanish speakers and focus on the importance of helping teachers work in multilingual settings. The border experience was one where we were actually recruited, because there were dual language programs and lots of good bilingual programs. When you live on the border and everyone speaks both languages no matter where you go, it’s a fascinating and wonderful place to live. But in the schools, bilingual education is still misunderstood.

I think living in both of those places has helped us understand different contexts. One thing I really wanted to emphasize in all of the places that we’ve lived and worked is that we try to take theory and put it into practice. We can only do that by working with wonderful teachers who are facing these challenges of working with students who speak many different languages, and they’re incredibly creative in meeting those needs. In South Texas, we worked with teachers who knew that students needed first language support, but they were often told that they shouldn’t let students use their first language. Yet, these teachers have figured out how to meet students’ needs. So in all cases, the common denominator is there are creative teachers who have figured out how to meet some of the challenges.

**DF:** One thing that we’ve written about that seems to work quite well is “Preview-View-Review.” A teacher previews a lesson in the first language, you teach it in English, and then you review it. Teachers always say, “But I’ve got kids from a variety of different languages and I don’t speak all those languages.” So, this model works nicely in a dual language program where the teacher does speak the languages of the kids.
But in other situations, the preview, for example, could be reading a story, could just be a very short overview. It could be given by a paraprofessional, a parent, or a student who is somewhat bilingual. Another thing we’ve seen work very well is to simply say, for example, “Today we’re going to learn about ocean fish and ocean mammals.” Have the kids get in same-language groups or pairs and talk in their first language about what they already know on the topic and then report back as best they can in English. Another thing is just to make an effort to bring in environmental print in the first language. You don’t have to speak the language; you can look things up online or find books in the first language. Adding those first-language resources to the classroom library provide a wonderful resource.

We found a nice example in a preschool where teachers had just put numbers up in the different languages of the kids. Simple things like having a map of the world and having the kids’ pictures around it with a piece of yarn stretched to the countries that they’re from, and recognizing the kids’ language and culture—they can make such a difference. Another thing, let’s say the kids kind of understand what the topic is and what they’re supposed to write, but they don’t know how to write in English. Have the kids write in their first language. Even if the teacher can’t read it, their writing shows you a lot about their literacy level, their handwriting, how much they can write, their paragraphing. All sorts of things come through.

**LA:** Here’s my favorite question. You have a bilingual and multicultural family. How has this informed your work and inspired you to do the amazing work that you’ve done with English learners.

**BF:** We love to talk about our family, so that’s a wonderful question! We brought our two daughters to Mexico, as I said earlier, and they really did become bilingual. But they only became bilingual because once we returned to the United States, they went to a bilingual school. We used both Spanish and English then because we became very involved with a Salvadoran family. Our older daughter, Mary, married a young man from El Salvador, and now whenever her two children get together with his side of the family, they only speak Spanish. Our oldest granddaughter, Maya, attends a dual language school here in California, and she is continuing to learn Spanish. Mary has followed in our footsteps and is teaching bilingual teachers and supporting teachers with ESL here at California State University, Chico. She is even teaching a course this semester in Spanish.

Our other daughter, Ann, is directing the bilingual program at Hunter College in New York City. She has helped to organize not just the Spanish-English bilingual program, but has also started a French-English program for dual language teachers in French dual immersion and another in Mandarin Chinese. Her husband is Greek American, and Ann studied Greek in college. Our older granddaughter in New York City, who is four now, went to Greek school for a year. So they are getting Spanish from Ann, and Greek from her husband’s side of the family. The culture is definitely there—the dancing, the Greek music, the Greek holidays, the Orthodox holidays, all of it. So all of those experiences really do constantly influence us.

**LA:** Would you like to say anything else to the readers of *Language Arts*?

**BF:** We hope that people will understand the importance of meeting the needs of emergent bilingual students. That is certainly our passion, but we have found that when teachers do get involved with their emergent bilinguals and begin to meet their needs, they also become passionate about this group of students.

**LA:** Bonnie and David, again congratulations on receiving NCTE’s 2013 Outstanding Educators in the English Language Arts award!

**BF/DF:** Thank you so much. This has been wonderful!

**References**


---

**NCTE Literacy Education Advocacy Day 2014: February 27**

Join NCTE members from across the nation for NCTE’s Literacy Education Advocacy Day on Thursday, February 27, 2014. NCTE members attending Advocacy Day will learn the latest about literacy education issues at the federal level and have a chance to interact with people highly involved with those issues. See http://www.ncte.org/action/advocacyday for details.