

Imagining a Multilingual TESOL TESOL 2008 – BEIS Academic Session

Presenters: Jim Cummins, Joshua Fishman, Ofelia García, Robert Phillipson, David Schwarzer, Rita Silver, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, & Joan Wink: Hilton, Sutton So., 4/4/2008, 2 to 4:45 p.m.

What The “Other” Taught Me About Bilingual Basics

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(A more complete document, pictures, and bibliography will be available after TESOL at <http://www.joanwink.com/sched.html>)

The more, the better.

The sooner, the better

The faster, the better

The harder, the better

The louder, the better.

Often, it seems that this is what the public understands about bilingualism, multilingualism, and/or language acquisition. If we want children to speak English in the United States, we have to give *more, sooner, faster, harder, and louder*. Because of this public (mis)understanding, or myth, or disinformation, depending on your own perspective, each of us in TESOL is called upon to explain our mutual complex understandings of language, culture, and pedagogy. Often, we only get a few minutes to do this. If we are in class, at the grocery store, at the family dinner table, or on a plane, we will be asked about bilingual & multilingual education.

It used to be that when someone sat down beside me on a plane and asked what I did, I would say that I am a teacher, and therefore, I would get no peace the rest of the trip, as everyone on planes has been to school and is an authority on education. In order to be able to read on a plane, I changed my answer. Now, when the person beside me asks me what I do, I say that I am a professor. Apparently no one wants to talk with a professor. However, if I am feeling unusually social, I'll answer that I am a rancher's wife. Everyone has nice things to say to a rancher's wife.

First, Your Stories Matter

We all love a story, as stories are how we make meaning in the world. Stories connect us with other people and with other ways of knowing. Our stories can inspire others; our stories expand our frames of references. However, I doubt we can understand another's perspective, IF we don't understand it in their language. Languages and stories are the glue that can hold us together. A rich, complex story with multidimensional people and perspectives can do the heavy lifting for our understandings.

Here is the bottom line of what I want to share today: As TESOL is filled with leaders of our multilingual 21st century, I challenge each person to create your own narrative, your own meaningful stories, which will make sense at the family dinner table. No transparencies; no computers and data projectors; just you and your own stories.

Where do these stories come from; they come from your heart, your head, your understandings, your experiences; or, as Frank Smith says, they come from your skin (Smith, 2007). None of us can build this path to a multilingual perspective alone, but together, we can. We must. We will.

Today in our limited time together, I'd like to do 2 things: I want to emphasize the importance of your own stories, not mine, and I want to share some pictures, which students have taught me, which represent the *bilingual basics*. In addition, I bring you one new picture, conceptualized by students. Everything I share is available for you at www.JoanWink.com. Just click on *Joan's Schedule* and help yourself.

For the first 10 years of my career, I stumbled along the road to a multilingual future, and I was lucky enough to land in southern Arizona with teenage native Spanish-speakers, who had much to teach me about the basics of being bilingual. There I was with *mi simbolismo de Don Quijote, mi pluscumperfecto, y mis pronombres requeteimportantes*, and there they were with their *real Spanish*. I was a convert the first day I was with them, and I never looked back. For the next 20 years of my career, I continued to help build that road; I carried a few rocks and smoothed a few basic bilingual bumps. I loved it, but then I realized that I was always singing to the choir, and as good as it felt, I began to wonder what the "other" was thinking. I dropped my bilingual and multilingual graduate classes, which I was then teaching; I started presenting at more English-centered professional conferences, and I found *Foundations of Education*, filled with the "other." They, too, had much to teach me, and in my last 10 years with the "other" I have learned that our stories matter, and the *bilingual basics* matter.

Dr. Fishman wrote in 1996, when speaking of language endangerment, "Sometimes, if you hear it again in other words, it becomes clearer in a different way." Your own narrative might just be what makes our shared understandings clearer in a different way for someone. Let me share with you a couple of examples. Everyone here knows of the considerable similarities and subtle differences between first and second language acquisition. However, in the latest Samway/McKeon (2007) book, I notice they tell a little story about it being like 2 sides of a coin, which essentially have the same composition but with different design and different features.

A second example: I so admire the work of Ofelia and her colleagues with their notion of *emergent bilinguals*. Yes, bilingualism is not bad; bilingualism is good. Monolingualism is 1; bilingualism is 2: Therefore, bilingual is more, not less. Every since NCLB took the word, *bilingual*, and insidiously replaced it with the acronym, ELL, I notice that I use the word, *bilingual*, more. OK, the truth, I use it *more, sooner, faster, harder, and louder*. Actually, we drill on it in class: *bilingual, bilingual, bilingual*. It always reminds me of Vygotsky's work, who made clear the reciprocal, dynamic relationship between language and thought; you can't separate them. Think of it like an onion; language is the skin of thought. (Oliver Wendel Holmes). If NCLB succeeds in taking the word, *bilingual*, from us, we are in danger of having the whole notion of being bilingual taken from us.

Second, the Bilingual Basics

The second idea, which I'd like to leave with you today, is something else I learned in the last 10 years from the students. Not only do we have to tell stories, it is also important to stick to the basics of bilingualism. The pictures I share with you today are the *bilingual basics*, <http://www.joanwink.com/sched.html>. They have stood the test of time, and they still work. In addition, I have one new picture, which was created by students.

Conclusion

Once I read that Joshua Fishman's father used to ask at the dinner table: What have you done for Yiddish today? It just hit me as it was said in a slightly different way, and it made such sense to me. So, in conclusion, I am asking myself: So, what have I done for Spanish today? And, I ask each of you: What have you done for another language today? I challenge you to create a story around this one line from Dr. Fishman's father – tell your stories; tell them loudly; tell them proudly.