

# Positioning teachers, positioning learners: Why we should stop using the term English learners

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to prompt educators to think deeply about the implications of the language we use to describe students who are learning English. We draw on positionality theory to argue that it is time to rethink the descriptors limited English proficient (LEP), former limited English proficient (FLEP), English language learners (ELLs), and English learners (ELs), which are often shortened to their acronyms, resulting in students being referred to as *leps*, *fleps*, and *els*. The use of these deficit-laden descriptors unintentionally positions educators to view their students as incapable and positions emergent bilingual learners to view themselves as deficient. Further, these labels prioritize English as the student's language, while ignoring the additional language(s) a student may already speak or may be developing. We advocate for adopting asset-based descriptors for students who speak languages in addition to English, building on Ofelia García's argument that these students have "an advantage over those who speak English only and for whom becoming bilingual will be more difficult" (2009, p. 322). We argue that changing the descriptors we use for students who are learning English as a new language will positively influence the way that teachers and principals perceive their positions as educators of these students, the ways they position students in their schools and classrooms, and ultimately the ways in which students position themselves. In the current political climate that marginalizes and villainizes immigrants and non-fluent speakers of English, positioning our students as assets to their communities and countries grows increasingly important.

Asset-focused descriptors appear in the research literature, and include dual language learners (see Castro, García, & Markos, 2013; E. E. García, Castro, & Markos, 2015; Goldenberg, Hicks, & Lit, 2013), bilingual learners (see Fránquiz, Salazar, & DeNicolo, 2011; Proctor, August, Carlo, & Barr, 2010) and emergent bilingual learners (O. García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008). Each of these descriptors recognizes students' full linguistic repertoires, does not privilege English, and could effectively replace deficit-laden terms. However, the descriptors *dual language learners* and *bilingual learners* suggest that students have formal opportunities to learn/develop two languages, when the reality is

that most students in the United States who speak a language other than English are in English as a second language (ESL) or sheltered English immersion programs that do not actively support their bilingualism. For this reason, we prefer *emergent bilingual learners*. The use of *emergent* also takes into account that children are in the process of developing more than one language and will likely have varying levels of proficiency in both the home language and English (Gort, de Jong, & Cobb, 2008).

## 2 | POSITIONALITY

During the past two decades, scholars have considerably reconceptualized the concepts of identity and positionality, which has served to expand and deepen our understanding of the identity construction of individuals who straddle multiple languages, cultures, and ethnic groups (e.g., Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejada, 1999; Norton, 2013). In fact, some scholars have problematized the term *identity*, arguing that it promotes a simplistic view of people as static members of one or more groups, which often leads to the notions of *us* and *them* in society (Anthias, 2008). Therefore, it is useful to look beyond the concept of identity and instead consider individuals as occupying shifting positions enacted through social interaction and language (Morita, 2012). Consequently, in this article we draw on the concept of positionality, which is more malleable and fluid than identity and which can be used to understand an individual's role and power in any given context (Acevedo et al., 2015). For example, we (the authors of this article) identify ourselves as women, daughters, wives, and so on. Within each of these identities we play various roles, have variable power and adopt different positionalities. We also identify ourselves as educators in institutions of higher education and play a variety of roles within this context. For example, we prepare future educators (teachers and administrators) of emergent bilingual learners, participate on multiple college committees to develop programs, and advocate for equity within our departments, colleges, and universities. Our power varies within each position. For instance, within the courses we teach, we are in positions of power relative to our students. Regardless of our shared identity as democratic educators and advocates for emergent bilingual learners, in our teacher educator roles we make decisions that impact our students with regard to course content, learning activities, assignments and grading. In other roles as higher education faculty, we are positioned by our rank and gender within our departments, which impacts our identities, roles, and power. Similarly, our PK-12 colleagues are positioned differently depending on their roles (e.g., superintendent, principal, teacher, paraprofessional), as well as their gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Positioning theory asserts that individuals “claim, assign, and reject” (Reeves, 2009, p. 34) multiple identities by positioning themselves in certain ways in relation to other people in given social, cultural, and political contexts. As a dynamic process that responds to shifts in context and actors, positioning offers a fluid and flexible way to examine social encounters and discourses (Davies & Harré, 1990).

## 3 | HOW EMERGENT BILINGUAL LEARNERS ARE POSITIONED: EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

According to positioning theory, students position themselves and are positioned by others depending on contextual factors (Morita, 2012; Reeves, 2009). For example, in the summers when Author 1 taught adult ESL in a neighborhood that was designated as “low-income housing,” she interacted with many emergent bilingual learners. At ages 9 and beyond, these children routinely cared for their younger siblings and often prepared lunch, which required them to walk to the neighborhood market

for groceries, where they were responsible for marketing, budgeting, and accounting (ensuring they received the correct change). They accomplished these complex household chores with proficiency. They also entertained themselves, fashioning dance costumes and holding talent shows. Sometimes they were relied upon to interpret for their parents, a task they typically accomplished with substantial communicative competence in English and Spanish. Some of the children's observed positionalities were competent caretakers, food providers, accountants, entertainers, and interpreters. Their positionality as competent, inquiry-oriented and inquisitive emergent bilingual learners was apparent. However, when these same students returned to school in September, they were positioned as ELs, students who struggled with academic content and whose major role was to learn English.

This focus on English at the expense of other languages influences the ways in which emergent bilingual learners position themselves. For example, when Author 3 was conducting research with Spanish-English bilinguals in elementary school settings, she observed a second-grade student boldly claim, "I don't speak Spanish, because I am American." This assertion was particularly surprising because previous literacy work with this student revealed that the student was not just bilingual, but also biliterate. This student's statement clearly demonstrates how even at a young age, linguistically marginalized populations are keenly aware of the power associated with the English language and thus position themselves as English speakers, which they equate with being American. Although we acknowledge that students' future academic success will depend on their competence in academic content and academic English, we argue that positioning students within this English monolith negatively influences the day-to-day recognition of the strengths and assets they bring to the classroom, which include their languages, cultures, and home/community knowledge.

#### **4 | HOW EDUCATORS ARE POSITIONED: EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD**

The approximately 83% of U.S. teachers who are monolingual English speakers (Williams, Garcia, Connally, Cook, & Dancy, 2016), positioned within the majority monolingual U.S. culture, often have had little exposure to other languages or speakers of other languages. Even when they have learned languages it is usually within the context of choice. This English monolingual position is a stark contrast to the positioning of emergent bilinguals for whom bi/multilingualism is the norm and a necessity.

In their schools, teachers are partially positioned by policy and leadership, which often privilege English and restrict the use of other languages within the school walls. These restrictive language policies (Gándara & Hopkins, 2011) have led to an overemphasis on English language development and the ongoing adoption of problematic labels such as LEP, EL, and ELL. We suggest that teachers' monolingualism combined with the use of deficit-laden labels positions teachers as purveyors of the English language. For example, when Author 2 worked in elementary schools as an English language development specialist, she often heard general education teachers suggest that their students should speak English in their homes in order to do better at school. According to these teachers, it was the parents' responsibility to abandon their home languages in favor of English. They perceived English-only as the path to academic success, despite the fact that research clearly shows the benefits of bilingualism (Bialystok, 2011; Thomas & Collier, 2002). Teachers were further positioned as purveyors of English by principals who adhered to the school district's de facto English-only policy. For instance, as Author 2 attempted to make math concepts comprehensible to a newcomer fifth grader from El Salvador, she was grateful for the language supports provided by a Spanish-speaking paraprofessional. The scaffolded instruction provided by the paraprofessional proved to be effective, until the principal

explained that no supports should be given in Spanish, thus privileging English as the only language of content-area instruction. Such policies position emergent bilingual learners as students with language deficits instead of as competent language users, and position teachers as providers of remedial instruction.

The ongoing use of the EL/ELL label also unintentionally positions teachers to view their students as academically incapable. First, the focus on English explicitly prioritizes English (and implicitly devalues the student's emergent bilingualism), thereby positioning teachers to only focus on what their students can do in English. For example, when Author 3 was discussing next steps for transitioning classified ELs into teachers' regular education classrooms, the teachers stated that "ELs were not ready" because their "English wasn't good enough," even though these teachers were endorsed in Sheltered English Instruction, and thus should have had the necessary pedagogical knowledge and skills to include emergent bilingual learners in their classrooms. Thus, the very use of the EL/ELL term clearly "others" students, suggesting that they are not academically capable due to the fact that they are still developing English.

## 5 | REPOSITIONING IN TEACHER EDUCATION: FROM EL/ELL TO EMERGENT BILINGUAL

In the current political climate that increasingly devalues cultural and linguistic diversity, it seems critical that TESOL educators would, through their language, create and position themselves within an asset-focused counter-narrative of the emergent bilingual learner story. As educators of future teachers, we need to challenge our teacher candidates to understand the context of education that is at present in many ways harmful to emergent bilingual students, and to use asset-based language to position themselves and their students within this context. In this way, we can position our teacher candidates as change agents. One way we (the authors) accomplish this is by adopting asset-focused language. We use the term emergent bilingual learners in all our methods courses for teachers and teacher candidates as well as in our courses for educational administrators, because it conveys that students who are learning English as another language have clear abilities and proficiencies in other languages and in other ways of knowing, thinking, and doing. As scholars, we have embraced the descriptors *emergent bilingual learner* and *bilingual learners* in our publications, presentations, and work with colleagues. The words we use help to create a counter-narrative about the emergent bilingual learners we teach and ourselves as teachers.

## 6 | THE AUTHORS

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