

Bilingualism Through the Public Eye

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As an educator who works with teacher candidates

preparing to work with emergent bilinguals, I try to give students a strong foundation in pedagogy and content (Shulman, 1983) and equip them with up-to-date research-based instructional and assessment skills (Valdes, Kibler, & Walqui, 2013). But prospective teachers also need to learn how events in the outside world impact our schools—how societal perspectives and national and local policy affect our students' experiences in ESL, SEI, and bilingual education classrooms. In this paper, I will share an assignment that I developed to encourage students to consider how national discourse can filter into their own instructional decisions and those of their peers.

Bilingualism Through the Public Eye (BPE) is a student-centered weekly assignment that allows teacher candidates to engage in dialogue on sociopolitical issues related to bilingualism. The assignment is described in the syllabus as follows:

During each class session, one or two student(s) will be responsible to briefly present a recent piece of media that portrays bilingualism in the public eye. Examples might include mainstream news articles, YouTube clips, blog posts, or institutional briefs that discuss a recent public, social, or educational policy related to bilingualism; op-ed pieces on the dual-language movement or immigration policy; or other instances in which bilingualism is discussed or represented to the general public. Policies, movements, and trends do not need to be limited to the United States or K-12 setting. The purpose of this activity is to develop an active awareness of global perspectives and events related to bilingual children and to lead a small discussion where you and your peers engage in a discussion of your particular topic. When it is your turn to lead, you must post a link to your article and two discussion questions to Twitter at least three days before class.

In response to this assignment, one or two teacher candidates in each class session lead the class in a 10-12 minute discussion about the BPE material they have posted. While it can be challenging to adhere to such a short time limit, this discipline helps my students learn to streamline their thinking.



Image 1. News Clip BPE Example


Since both the content and medium of BPE is open, BPEs range from news articles, blog posts, and magazine articles to audio/visual media, including TedTalks, podcast episodes, and news clips from YouTube. An example from one of my Fall 2017 courses centered around a YouTube news clip (Image 1) from an incident that occurred in a New Jersey high school, where a teacher told students “They’re not fighting for your right to speak Spanish, they’re fighting for your right to speak American.” The student who led this discussion brought the following discussion questions: (1) *How does the phrase “speak American” differ from the phrase “speak English?” Is there an underlying message that the teacher was trying to deliver when she opted for the former?* and (2) *Often, in an educational setting, students feel ashamed or isolated for being bilingual because it sets them apart from their peers. Later on in their lives, many will find the idea of bilingualism to be more desirable/beneficial. Why do you think this is? How much of an impact do you think the teacher in the video had on the students?*

This BPE led to a discussion of the connotations of “Americanization,” the fact that English is not an official language of the United States, and ways teachers can welcome students’ home language(s) into the classroom.

“They’re not fighting for your right to speak Spanish, they’re fighting for your right to speak American.”

My goals for the assignment are for students to become more aware of how bilingualism and related issues such as immigration are portrayed in the media and how media portrayal influences the general public’s understanding of bilingualism and, by extension, education policy and programming. I have also found that the way students craft their questions can serve as an informal assessment of how they are currently thinking about issues of racism, linguicism,

and social justice, thus helping to guide my own instruction and discussion. Finally, I have found that the BPE can serve as an organic link to content and pedagogy. This particular BPE was shared on the same day that we introduced translanguaging pedagogy (Daniel & Pacheco, 2016), so we were able to connect the conversation about students' home language(s) with our discussion of bilingual instructional practices.

I have implemented this assignment across all my courses, including research courses, ESL methods courses, and the SEI Endorsement course. It is my hope that fellow teacher educators who are looking to provide more space for unpacking dispositions and perspectives can adopt this assignment in their own courses. 

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Dr. Christine Leider is a Clinical Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Boston University, where she is also the Program Director of Bilingual Education and TESOL Licensure. She works with pre- and in-service teachers to develop responsive and inclusive curricular and instructional practices that support bilingual students' language and literacy skills and create classroom spaces that honor and value immigrant students' cultural and linguistic identities. Her research focuses on bilingualism, biliteracy, and equitable education for emergent bilinguals.