

To Speak or Not to Speak: A Rationale for First Language Usage in the Home

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As each academic day draws to a close and teachers prepare to leave their schools, many worry about the amount of English that will or will not be spoken by English language learners once they leave the classroom. As a result, students are frequently encouraged to “speak English at home” or “read in English this weekend.” In addition, if given the opportunity, both English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and general education teachers often suggest to parents that their children need to practice English during holiday and summer breaks. While these requests reflect a sincere interest in the students’ acquisition of English, they are frequently taken literally and can contribute negatively to students’ overall language and cognitive development.

Current studies on the effect of bilingualism on the academic growth of students conclude that when children maintain their first language ability, they transfer skills to their second language; in fact, “native language proficiency is a powerful predictor of the rapidity of second language development.” (“Bilingualism and Bilingual Education: A Research Perspective,” K. Hakuta, Stanford University). In a paper presented at a Georgetown University Roundtable on Language and Linguistics, Richard Tucker from the Center for Applied Linguistics quoted recent research which determined that “bilingual individuals tended to be more creative individuals, to have a greater degree of cognitive flexibility, and to have significantly higher measured verbal or nonverbal I.Q. than their monolingual counterparts.” Thus, it is in the language minority student’s best interest to maintain—and if possible continue to develop—fluency in the first language.

Language minority students and their parents, realizing the importance and necessity of learning English, frequently set unrealistic expectations and demands on themselves. Many parents have complained to teachers that “José doesn’t want to speak English at home” or that “Keun-Hwa speaks too much Korean when she’s out of school.” In some households, children are prohibited from speaking anything but English. While the hope is that these children will master English with greater speed, the opposite frequently occurs.

Language develops when the learner is provided with many and varied opportunities to express ideas, share feelings, and discuss topics of interest and/or concern; in short, individuals must use and manipulate language in order to master it. In a home where the parents are primarily monolingual and the children are still dominant in their native language, the level of English discourse is at best minimal, at worst non-existent. Such a setting deprives the learner of the language-rich environment necessary for vocabulary growth and concept development. The student ends up speaking neither English nor the native tongue proficiently; he/she is still unable to communicate effectively in English, but is not allowed to converse in the dominant language. In this environment, José is likely to hear and speak broken English instead of sophisticated, complex, and meaningful Spanish.

Educators can do much toward debunking the “English Only” myth. They can help re-educate colleagues and share research findings with them. Likewise, they can emphasize to parents the importance of maintaining and promoting both the native language as well as its culture. Parents should be encouraged to read to younger children in the parent’s strongest language and to ask children to retell these stories. Older children can read for analysis and to make inferences. Again, it is important to stress that current studies have concluded, “Reading and listening comprehension strategies can be taught to children in their first language, and they will transfer these strategies to similar tasks in the second language.” (“Utilization of Knowledge Acquired through the First Language in Comprehending A Second Language: Narrative Comprehension by Spanish-English Speakers,” University of California.)

When the native and second languages of individuals are seen as complementary rather than mutually exclusive, opportunities for growth are created. With this concept in mind, students should be encouraged to read, write, and speak...read, write, and speak,...read, write and speak in their dominant language as well as in English at home and after school. The rewards will be reaped by both teachers and students in the future.