Perspectives on Practice

~~Struggling~~ Learners: Reflections on Reclaiming a Good Word Gone Bad

Patrick H. Smith

Readers are invited to consider how different forms of the word *struggling* express and evoke meanings that represent emergent bilingual learners as capable or incapable.

The meanings of words change over time. This is the central notion in Raymond Williams' 1976 book *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* and subsequent works (Bennett, Grossberg, & Morris, 2005). To date, *struggling* does not appear as a keyword in these analyses. For language arts educators who teach emergent bilingual learners and other minoritized students, this omission is unfortunate because *struggling* is a label that is used, typically without evidence, to describe the school performance of many of our students (González & Artiles, 2015). When applied indiscriminately, this label reinforces deficit views of emergent bilinguals and other children who are perceived as lacking the forms of language and literacy required in schools (Brooks & Frankel, 2018).

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In this Perspective on Practice, I analyze the use of the word *struggling* and how different forms of the word express and evoke meanings that can frame language learners in ways that are positive or negative. My aim is to encourage language arts educators who work with emergent bilinguals and

users of languages other than Standard American English to reflect on how we use this word and on the implications for the well-being and education of linguistically diverse children.

A persistent and harmful assumption about bilingual learners' low performance on standardized achievement tests in U.S. schools is that these children are linguistically deficient because they come from linguistically poor families and communities. Notably, the notion of a "language gap" or "word gap" has been proposed to explain why, compared to their monolingual English-speaking peers, emergent bilinguals do poorly on measures of academic achievement. A typical example comes from a blog by the publisher Schoolyard School Specialty (2018):

> ELL students struggle academically for a variety of reasons. Think about it—the challenges of learning a new language, the many exceptions in the English language, and differences in regional dialects—they're all overwhelming factors that can frustrate your ELL students.
>
> This frustration can lead to a lack of motivation, or even to an over-dependence on teachers or peers to assist them. Your ELL students who lack the vocabulary that their peers have struggle with concepts like homonyms and synonyms, and can suffer from poor communication in the classroom. As a result, they may continue to speak more often in their native language, or be fearful of participating and speaking out in a classroom setting—all of which negatively affect their overall learning in the classroom.

Critiques of "gap discourse" (Avineri et al., 2015; García & Otheguy, 2017) draw on a half-century of research about the linguistic and literacy strengths of bi/multilingual communities to show that educational policies, curriculum, learning materials, and instructional practices based on an assumed word gap contribute to educational disparities for emergent bilinguals. They argue that the monolingual and deficit conditions of schooling, and not children's bilingualism, are placing linguistically diverse children at risk of school failure (Johnson, 2019).

Despite this research base, deficit views of linguistically diverse learners persist in educational policy and practice. Flores (2020) urges a change in focus away from disproving the supposed deficiencies of children and families. Instead, he calls for examination of the beliefs, policies, and practices of "the white listening subject," to study and interrogate how "whitestream" (Urrieta, 2010) and monolingual views of language and literacy marginalize emergent bilinguals and limit their learning.

Following this line of thinking, I believe that *struggling* reflects a word gap in the professional knowledge of language arts educators. Teachers contribute to this professional word gap when we accept, perhaps unknowingly, the notion that emergent bilingual learners are inherently struggling learners. As Adair et al. argue in their analysis of how the word gap impacts young Latinx learners, "We all need to be more critical of the ideas and arguments we use as a basis for how we treat and what we offer young children" (Adair et al., 2017, p. 328).

A Brief History of *Struggling*

The English word *struggle* in verb form dates to the fourteenth century and is possibly derived from Old Norse, German, or Dutch. The noun form of *struggle* first appeared about 200 years later (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). In contemporary usage, some forms of the word *struggle* have positive connotations. For example, as a verb, it can connote individual efforts as well as a sense of solidarity and group action to overcome barriers (e.g., "to struggle for equal rights"). As a noun, *struggle* can refer to

a collective movement against injustice (e.g., "the struggle for a living wage"). In these examples, *struggle* refers to a contested process that is ultimately beneficial and worthwhile, despite the great effort and even pain involved.

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However, in the form of an adjective—*struggling*—the word spells trouble for those it is used to label. Emergent bilinguals are often referred to in schools and in the educational literature as "struggling readers," and this term is used to justify placing them in remedial instruction and special education (Brooks & Frankel, 2018; González & Artiles, 2015). The term *struggling* rarely appeared in published book titles before 2000; its popularity in books about education may be traced to the prominence of the term in "Reading First" legislation (Gamse et al., 2008) and related publications aimed at "fixing" learners through remedial instruction.

A Contemporary Example of "Struggling" Discourse about Bilingual Learners

The appointment of Dr. Miguel Cardona as U.S. Secretary of Education in March 2021 illustrates how emergent bilingual students are portrayed as struggling. Media coverage of the confirmation hearing of Cardona, a Spanish/English bilingual who holds graduate degrees in bilingual education and educational administration, highlights dominant discourses about "struggling" English learners. The following description published by the Associated Press appeared in news outlets across the country: "Through his career, he has focused on closing education gaps and supporting bilingual education. It's a personal issue for Cardona, who says he spoke only Spanish when he entered kindergarten and struggled to learn English" (Binkley, 2021). Similarly, *Learning English*, a podcast produced by the Voice of America, reported that "Cardona grew up

in government-supported housing. . . . His parents, who are from Puerto Rico, spoke Spanish to him. Cardona did not even speak English when he entered the public school system". The podcast presents Dr. Cardona's background as "one that many American children can relate to. He grew up in a public housing project . . . as an English language learner, and worked hard to succeed and stand out." A supporter of Cardon's nomination adds, "He has come such a long way."

These comments reflect dominant views that bilingual learners must overcome their home and language backgrounds in order to achieve school success. Like the Schoolyard School Specialty example, they present language learning as inherently difficult rather than a developmental process that all people can succeed at. Children's home backgrounds are assumed to be obstacles or barriers to learning. Such views ignore Cardona's bilingualism and disregard the advantages that bilingualism and biliteracy confer when children experience additive conditions of schooling (Moll, 2008). They also equate learning English with poverty and suggest that only truly exceptional English learners can succeed in school.

Why This Matters Now

The word *struggling* positions emergent bilinguals and other linguistically diverse students as less capable than their English monolingual peers. This has implications for language arts education as the number of emergent bilingual children continues to grow at all grade levels. With increasing support for universal early childhood education and more immigrant and bilingual children attending preschool (White et al., 2020), deficit views about language can negatively impact children's learning just when their language development and language socialization are in full bloom (Dyson, 2016). When skills-based and assessment-driven monolingual English instruction are being extended to early childhood programs in the name of "school readiness" (Hoffman et al., 2020), multilingual children are at risk of being labeled as "struggling" even before they enter kindergarten (Martínez, 2018). Curriculum and instruction developed for "struggling" readers often

feature reduced content and a heavy emphasis on basic skills presented in isolation (Learned, 2018). They also disregard students' funds of linguistic knowledge (Smith, 2001), thereby limiting their opportunities to learn or "catch up" to the academic performance of their English monolingual peers.

Recommendations for Practice

One area for change in practice is teacher preparation. Many language arts educators, including graduates of bilingual education programs, have studied in K–12 and university programs that represent bilingual children as struggling learners (Smith & Murillo, 2015). Working with practicing and future teachers to deconstruct deficit ideologies and develop alternative pedagogies that portray bilingual learners as linguistically gifted is a major challenge for teacher preparation programs (Murillo, 2021). Language arts educators can reflect on our own professional formation by asking questions such as "How does our teacher preparation program address issues of bilingualism and biliteracy?" "Do student teaching experiences and professional development opportunities reinforce or challenge dominant assumptions about emergent bilinguals as inherently struggling?" and "Are we learning instructional methods for teaching literacy, reading, and writing that help us recognize and build upon the strengths of emergent bilinguals?"

In our classrooms, libraries, and other school spaces, teachers can analyze language arts curriculum for assumptions about "struggling" emergent bilingual learners. As a first step, grade-level planning teams can identify materials or teaching strategies that frame bilingual learners as deficient and choose more meaningful alternatives. A team of first-grade teachers in an elementary school in central Texas did this by scrapping the practice of publicly displaying Accelerated Reader scores after hearing children and colleagues comment on the low scores of bilingual students. Team planning led these teachers to drop this form of assessment altogether, focusing instead on individual student portfolios to equitably showcase student progress. By listening to bilingual learners, transformative teachers can identify and build upon their "existing

linguistic, literate, and experiential resources" (Brooks & Frankel, 2018, p. 112).

As teachers, we can focus our practice on healing the harmful effects of school policies grounded in monolingual thinking. By contesting descriptions of bilingual learners as "struggling" or "at risk," language arts educators become advocates for emergent bilingual children and their learning. The truth is there are plenty of alternative ways that more accurately describe the process of language and literacy development. These include *developing*, *learning*, *growing*, and *practicing*, to name only a few.

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We may also rehabilitate the word *struggling* to acknowledge the very real challenges that many emergent bilinguals face, such as poverty and discriminatory practices in employment, housing, and healthcare. We should not burden children further with misleading and denigrating labels like *struggling learners* or *struggling readers*.

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