



# USING LANGUAGES IN EDUCATION

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** In this issue of *The Language Educator*, we continue our series of articles on different career opportunities available to language professionals by looking at work in the field of education.

BY PATRICIA KONING

In the field of education, the need for languages extends beyond foreign language classrooms. As school populations become more diverse, the need for bilingual and multilingual educators and school staff increases and is often a requirement in ensuring equal access to quality education for all students.

The area of special education has one of the strongest needs for multilingualism. "Research has clearly shown that minority students are disproportionately represented in special education," says Dr. Julie Esparza Brown, director of Portland State University's Bilingual Special Educator (BiSped) Program, in Portland, OR. "Distinguishing between a true disorder and a language-related delay is difficult. To assess an English language learner, you need a teacher who understands first and second language development, speaks the native language, and is trained in both special and English as a second language (ESL)/bilingual education."

The field, says Esparza Brown, is really coming into its own in part because of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). "A positive side to NCLB is we are accountable for every single subgroup, so the achievement of English language learners is finally on the map," she explains. "We need to look at best practices and research and how to create the best systems."

Another impetus is the reauthorization of the special education law, the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) with a new option for eligibility decisions called Response to Intervention (RTI). Before schools can say there is an intrinsic issue with a child, they first must scrutinize the educational environment to ensure that it is appropriate and meeting the needs of the child linguistically, culturally, and experientially. "You need to determine that the problem is not with the curriculum or learning environment before looking to within (the individual) child for difficulties," says Esparza Brown.

Bilingual special education combines the two fields in a way that seeks to both identify students who do not need special education services but who may be struggling due to second language issues and to place only students who truly have a disorder into special education programs.

Esparza Brown became a special education teacher straight out of graduate school because of personal experience. Her cousin had special needs and, as the only family member with a college degree, she wanted to help her aunt and grandmother navigate the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process. In fact, she completed her special education student teaching in her cousin's classroom.

A third-generation Mexican American raised within a Mexican-American community, Esparza Brown became a certified bilingual teacher to meet the needs of her district. "After teaching bilingual kindergarten for several years, I taught a K-6 special day class in California in which the one commonality was the need for specially designed instruction in Spanish," she says. "Working in the native language, I saw tremendous progress in each student no matter their disability. It has been my passion ever since to link these two fields."

For many school districts, meeting the education code requirement that students be assessed in their native language poses a challenge. The difficulties in distinguishing between a language problem and learning disability lead to minority students being over- or under-identified for special education services.

Another challenge is working with parents with limited English in the IEP process. "To fully participate in IEP meetings, parents need to communicate in the language they are most comfortable," says Shelley Viramontez, an assistant superintendent of human resources in the Campbell Union School District in California. "An interpreter is often someone the parent is meeting for the first time and may never



*Dr. Julie Esparza Brown speaks at a conference for the Bilingual Special Education (BiSped) program at Portland State University.*

encounter again." She says that parents may feel more comfortable speaking with a bilingual teacher.

"Delivering special education instruction in the native language strengthens the connection between home and school. If primary instruction is only given in English, it is very difficult for non-English speaking parents to work with their children at home," says Esparza Brown.

Portland State's BiSped program trains bilingual teachers and educational assistants from 10 local school districts to fill the critical need. Credentialed teachers as well as educational assistants (who already hold a Bachelor's degree) can earn a Master's degree and state-authorized certification to teach special education. In addition to their licensure courses, BiSped students take courses in second language acquisition, nondiscriminatory assessment, biliteracy, and collaboration across cultures.

"We've been talking about these issues for years—the struggle for resources, how do we identify students, and how do we serve dual-identified students," says Maranda Turner, a BiSped student who is also a bilingual teacher in the Reynolds School District in Fairview, OR. "When this program started, it was an opportunity I could not pass up. It addresses all the different issues we've been grappling with." She expects to be one of the program's first graduates later this year.

To be eligible for the program, teachers, educational assistants, and students must already be bilingual. While all of the current students are Spanish speakers, Esparza Brown says the area has a need for teachers that speak Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese and other languages as well.

"Graduates of this program understand the legal mandates of both bilingual and special education, and can help culturally diverse families understand our educational process. BiSped teachers can also model to their colleagues how to effectively work with an interpreter," says Esparza Brown. "But instruction given directly in the native language is always preferred."

## **SPEECH OR LANGUAGE?**

Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) experience similar issues as special educators at the intersection of language and disability. Both fields also have a severe shortage of people trained to provide services in a second language.

Claudia Saad learned Spanish as a child, in part, because it was the only way to communicate with her grandmother who spoke no English. After her grandmother had a stroke that resulted in a speech impairment, she could not get any speech therapy services because at that time there was no such thing as a bilingual speech therapist.

"I decided to pursue a career as a bilingual speech-language pathologist because there is a whole population that won't get treatment unless services are offered in multiple languages," she says.

Saad double-majored in Spanish and Speech-Language Pathology and then earned her Master's in Speech-Language Pathology from the University of Maryland at College Park. She describes her career as incredibly rewarding. "You are helping people with communication, which is crucial to every part of life," she explains. "And as a bilingual SLP, you are helping people who might not get services because of the language barrier."

She is now the director of multicultural education for the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). In this role, she provides resources for bilingual members of ASHA and tools to help monolingual members when they work with clients with limited English skills.

"One of the biggest challenges for our field right now is distinguishing between a true communication disorder or a language difference," Saad explains. "Bilingual children or LEP [limited English proficiency] children are in danger of being under- or over-identified as being communicatively impaired. You really need to understand second language acquisition to conduct an accurate assessment."

Bilingual speech-language pathology is inherently more complex than working in a single language. Treatment plans must consider if it is best to focus on one language at a time or both simultaneously. And such plans are often in flux as a gain in one language may result in a loss in the other.

"A bilingual SLP is really best for the client," says Saad. "It is possible to provide services through an interpreter, but it definitely slows the process. A bilingual SLP can make changes on the fly, which can be a big part of working with children."

Bilingual SLPs are highly sought after and generally enjoy more job security. Bilingual SLPs can also get salary supplements, and contract work sometimes pays more for bilingual services. "There simply aren't enough to go around," says Saad. "And in the interview stage, this can give an applicant an edge."

## **BETTER PAY, JOB SECURITY**

Schools benefit from bilingual teachers in core classrooms as well and many school districts recognize and reward those schools. In the Campbell Union School District, located in a suburb of San Jose, CA, certified bilingual teachers and staff members receive additional pay for their skills.



## A VIRTUAL SCHOOL MODEL

The Garland Independent School District (TX) is taking a new approach to meeting the needs of its bilingual students through a virtual school. BE/ESL Program Director Shannon Terry says Garland will be hiring four bilingual Vietnamese teachers to work in 8 to 10 elementary schools across the District starting in the 2010–2011 school year. These teachers will pull double duty—they will work with Vietnamese-speaking students in the identified schools and develop online instructional modules that can be accessed by any student in the district.

“In the future, we envision developing instructional modules in English and then adapting those modules to all 66 languages so kids can have reinforcement in their native language,” explains Terry. “So we need curriculum developers who are multilingual and well-versed in instructional design. At first the modules would be static, but with all the technology available we hope to make it interactive.”

In the 2010–2011 school year, the teachers will develop and pilot the basic framework for bilingual instruction in Vietnamese. “Once we’ve passed the learning curve, we anticipate in the 2011–2012 school year moving onto Arabic, Amharic, and Malayan,” says Terry. “We’re also looking at Mandarin and Cantonese because of the population in our district.”

Garland was forced into considering alternatives to the traditional classroom setting by a lack of qualified teachers, limited resources, and the complicated logistics of reaching the students who need bilingual education. (There might be 30 Vietnamese students at a school, for example, but 19 are in the fifth grade, five are in the third grade, and two each are in all the other grades.)

Terry and other colleagues visited schools across Texas and looked at many more online to find a similar program already in place, but came up empty. “The concept of a virtual school is not new, but this seems to be a new application,” she explains. “The good news is that all of the framework for a virtual school exists and is well-tested.”

The question still remains as to whether the virtual school will meet the Texas education code. Terry is confident the virtual school for bilingual education, if developed properly, can serve students’ needs and satisfy state requirements.

“Especially as we move onto other languages, we are looking for independent consultants to create and enhance curriculum. We need folks who speak and write these languages who are creative authors to develop materials. It’s a critical need but I think there are a lot of potential partners,” she says.

Assistant Superintendent Shelley Viramontez says that bilingual teachers and staff have a clear advantage in hiring. “If we’re looking at candidates with similar skill sets but one is bilingual, that candidate will get the job. We have a large Hispanic population, so a Spanish speaker in any job helps us serve the community better,” she says. “We had a teaching position come open mid-year. There were over 100 applicants for the job, so we had the luxury of only considering those that were bilingual.”

Beyond landing the job, being bilingual can help teachers hang onto their jobs. Last year, over 26,000 teachers in California received layoff notices and an equal number or more are expected this year. In Campbell, as well as most school districts, a bilingual certification is considered a skipping criteria. Certificated teachers are laid off according to years of service, education, and credentials. If all things are equal, the advantage goes to bilingual-certified teachers.

In Campbell, teachers are certified as bilingual if they possess California’s Bilingual Crosscultural Language and Academic Development (BCLAD) credential or if they pass an internal written and oral assessment. Currently, Campbell has 30 BCLAD-certified teachers and an additional 13 employees receiving compensation for biliteracy.

Across the country, school districts are seeking bilingual teachers in many languages. Texas requires that any school district with at least 20 students who speak a non-English language provide a bilingual program in that language. The Texas State Board for Educator Certification added Vietnamese, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian to its bilingual program, but educators in Texas report difficulties in filling these positions.

“Of the 57,000 students in our district, approximately 37% speak a language other than English. We’ve identified 66 different languages that are spoken across the district,” says Shannon Terry, the director of bilingual education and ESL (BE/ESL) programs in the Garland Independent School District, located in a northeast suburb of Dallas. “We’ve had a difficult time filling these positions. We’re lacking state resources, in comparison to what has been developed for Spanish. Certification requirements and assessment systems are still evolving.”

School districts like Garland then find themselves in a bind. They can file an exemption with the Texas Department of Education, but the expectation is that the situation will be remedied within a year. “We’ve had to explore creative options for finding teachers who speak these languages,” says Terry. [See box to left on Garland’s Virtual School experiment for more on these efforts.]

## LANGUAGES IN CORE ACADEMIC CLASSES

Darshan Thakkar has found that as a high school math teacher in Haverhill, MA, his understanding of Spanish not only allows him to effectively communicate with all of his students, it also informs the way he teaches. A native of India, Thakkar has native fluency in Hindi, Gujarati, and Marathi.





*Darshan Thakkar teaching math at Haverhill High School in Haverhill, MA.*

"I've always been intrigued by languages and linguistics. As a child, my ambition was to be fluent in nine languages," he says. "I'm still working towards that dream." He studied Spanish in high school and college and has recently been learning Arabic through self-study.

Roughly one-third of the population of his school community is Spanish-speaking, so on a practical level he is able to communicate with all his students because of his ability to deliver bilingual instruction. In his lower-level classes, he divides the class into three groups. First he lectures in English, then in Spanish and English, and then in Spanish only.

"The goal is for the students to learn the math concepts while gaining proficiency in English," he says. "Math in itself is a language. There are specific words and phrases that are used and you have to break down complex concepts into simple components."

For students with limited English ability, he creates flashcards with math lingo like "find the value of"—words that do not always translate literally. In his advanced classes, he has his English-speaking students do problems in English and Spanish as a way to make the curriculum more interesting and challenging.

The students get reinforcement in Spanish and find that the lessons stay with them better. For example, the Spanish word for "to find" is *buscar*, but in math class the correct word is *hallar*. *Buscar* is usually used in the context of finding something physical, while *hallar* is about looking for an abstract idea, such as value of a variable in an equation.

Thakkar's methods have paid off in achievement gains for all of his students. He is also a resource for the entire school. Teachers refer their limited English students to him for help and Spanish-speaking students seek out his assistance on homework. He has developed some resources, such as the math vocabulary flashcards, that he shares with other teachers at his school and at nearby middle schools. Another project is translating sample word problems from the state standardized tests into different languages.

"I translate both the question and the answer, so students can understand the proper answer format," he explains. "On the state test, just answering a word problem with the correct number is not enough. In open response questions, the answer has to be descriptive."

## THE HEART OF THE SCHOOL

The school office is described as the heart of the school—the place where parents interface with the school administration as well as the clearinghouse of information. While bilingual teachers like Thakkar provide essential instruction to students in the classroom, bilingual office staff help bring parents into the school. In Westminster, CA, where Vietnamese Americans make up 30% of the population, the Westminster School District relies on community liaisons placed at each of its schools to communicate important information to parents.

Angie Quach worked for 10 years as a teacher in Vietnam before moving to the United States. She worked as a teacher's assistant in the Westminster schools and has been a community liaison at Anderson Elementary School in Garden Grove, CA (also part of the Westminster School District) for the past three years.

"I love my work. I love helping the kids and their families," she says. "My job is very busy and I constantly draw upon my experience as a teacher in Vietnam and as a teaching assistant here."

Parents come to her with questions about testing, classroom activities, progress reports, assemblies, field trips, the school lunch program, and anything else happening at the school. Vietnamese students are comfortable with Quach and she often finds herself running interference between students and parents, parents and teachers, and teachers and students.

At Marylin Avenue Elementary School in Livermore, CA, parent community coordinator Maria Toscano, who speaks Spanish fluently, was able to get 100% attendance at parent-teacher conferences last fall.

"Seven years ago, one-third of our families attended conferences. Three years ago, it was 75%," says Marylin Avenue Principal Jeff Keller. "Maria followed up with parents, arranged translators, and did everything necessary to make those conferences work. She has made a huge difference in bringing together our community."



*A bilingual speech-language pathologist working with a student.*



She has also brought many parents into the school as volunteers. “Many immigrants don’t know how the schools work or what they expect of parents,” she says. “They think they can’t volunteer if they can’t speak the language. I know how they feel because I was in the same boat when I came to this country 13 years ago.”

Marylin Avenue also has a bilingual attendance clerk, Laura Torres, whose language skills are crucial in contacting Spanish-speaking

families about attendance issues. In the front office, she is the face that many parents feel most comfortable seeing.

“The benefits of our bilingual staff are huge,” says Keller. “They help us communicate better with parents and students. They let our families know we value them and their culture. And they allow parents to be an active part of their children’s education. Staff members like Maria and Laura make Marylin Avenue a richer school.”

## HOW DO I BECOME A . . .

**Bilingual Speech-Language Pathologist.** To become a speech-language pathologist, one must attend an accredited graduate program. Graduates then pass a national exam and complete a year of supervised clinical work, similar to a residency for medical school graduates. Currently, there is no certification of language skills, but there are graduate programs with bilingual tracks and certificates. Most employers require a nationally recognized assessment of language skills.

San Diego State University offers a Bilingual Speech-Language Pathology Certificate through its School of Speech, Language, and Hearing Services. Students must be actively seeking state licensure or a Master’s degree in speech-language pathology. The certificate requires 13 units of coursework and a four-unit graduate practicum with the targeted bilingual population.

At the University of Texas–Austin, students at the Master’s level in speech-language pathology can earn a bilingual/multicultural certificate with five credits of specialized coursework and 125 hours of bilingual clinical experience.

Students in Arizona State University’s bilingual training track of the Master’s in speech-language pathology take bilingual emphasis coursework in addition to regular classes, complete bilingual training track clinical practicum hours, and work under a bilingual supervisor to develop their professional Spanish. Students in the program also have the opportunity to study abroad in Mexico for six weeks in the summer, working with children with disabilities and their families.

To find other graduate speech-language pathology programs with a bilingual emphasis, use the EdFind tool on the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association website.

**Bilingual Special Education Teacher.** Special education teachers typically undergo longer periods of training than general education teachers. For example, in California, a teaching credential can be earned in one year in most programs, while a special education credential takes two years.

The job outlook for special education teachers is strong. The Bureau of Labor Statistics expects the number of special education teachers to increase by 17% from 2008 to 2018. With few graduate programs training bilingual special education teachers, those with language skills are a sought-after commodity.

“Once these students are out in the market, they can name their position,” says Director Julie Esparza Brown, referring to graduates of her certificate program at Portland State University. The program will graduate its first students this spring.

She adds that people interested in bilingual special education should be able to work well with families and collaborate with colleagues. “The field is really about the interface of two fields: bilingual and special education, so you have to be able to bridge differences between professions and work at creating teams,” she explains. “For anyone who feels strongly about equitable education systems, it’s a wonderful opportunity. These are much needed skills.”

George Washington University in Washington, DC, offers one of eight programs in the country that prepares educators to meet the cultural, language, social, and learning needs of a growing number of culturally and linguistically diverse, and/or exceptional students. The program emphasizes culturally responsive instruction, assessment, and service practices in order to prepare professionals to distinguish—and differentiate appropriately—between students with a disability and students who are in the process of second language acquisition.

Colorado State University offers a Master’s degree in social multicultural foundations (SMBF): bilingual/ESL special education. Completion of the program qualifies one for a teacher certification double endorsement in the areas of special education generalist and linguistically diverse education (K–12).

To be eligible, one must be certified as an elementary or secondary teacher with a year of teaching experience or verified experience working with special needs children. The program is part-time with courses offered in the evenings and summer, designed to be completed over three years.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association  
[www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org)

Garland Independent School District  
[www.garlandisd.net](http://www.garlandisd.net)

George Washington University,  
Master's in Bilingual Special Education  
[gsehd.gwu.edu/bilingual](http://gsehd.gwu.edu/bilingual)

National Association for Bilingual Education  
[www.nabe.org](http://www.nabe.org)

National Association of Special Education Teachers  
[www.naset.org](http://www.naset.org)

Portland State University, BiSpEd Program  
[www.pdx.edu/education/program\\_directory](http://www.pdx.edu/education/program_directory)

San Diego State University  
Bilingual Speech-Language Pathology Certificate  
[slhs.sdsu.edu/bilingualcert.php](http://slhs.sdsu.edu/bilingualcert.php)

University of Texas–Austin, Communication Sciences  
and Disorders Bilingual/Multicultural Certificate  
[csd.utexas.edu/graduate/masters/bilingual/index.htm](http://csd.utexas.edu/graduate/masters/bilingual/index.htm)

For teachers like Maranda Turner and Darshan Thakkar, using language as a core component of their classroom work translates into a richer experience as a teacher. “When we teach someone language, we learn not only about that person but about ourselves and our own culture,” says Turner. “It is really exciting to give kids access to the mainstream community while also empowering them to be advocates for their home community. It’s a really powerful experience we can have as educators.”

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*Patricia Koning is a freelance writer and regular contributor to The Language Educator based in Livermore, California. She covers education for the Livermore Independent and has written for numerous local publications on the wine industry, small business, and lifestyle topics.*

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