

# FOSTERING ACCULTURATION VIA CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEACHING PRACTICES TO ENHANCE SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN THE BILINGUAL AND ESL CLASSROOM

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## *Abstract*

*This paper discusses the topics of assimilation and acculturation, presenting the negative effects of assimilation in second language acquisition and how acculturation could benefit English learners' second language acquisition process. Additionally, classroom implications and strategies for promoting acculturation via culturally responsive teaching practices for the bilingual and ESL classroom are showcased.*

Keywords: assimilation, acculturation, culturally responsive teaching, second language acquisition, teacher education

The rate of diversity in the United States has been on a rapid rise for decades and through the efforts of cultural minority groups such as advocates and parents of English learners (ELs) and bilingual students, the U.S. education system has been trying to explore many ways to educate non-native speakers of English and children of different culturally diverse backgrounds. According to the Office of English Language Acquisition (2020) "By SY [(school year)] 2016-17, the EL population had grown more than one million students to a total of 4,858,377 EL's, representing 9.6% of total student enrollment". This rise in ELs means that educators need to start thinking about ways to better serve these students and make sure that all are getting the education needed to lead this country. Additionally, Samuels (2018) mentions that when working to advance educator preparation and better equip the next generation of teachers to advocate for educational equity, teacher educators and preparation programs must commit to fostering learning that examines how to meet the social academic needs of diverse student populations (p. 22).

Some of the efforts from the U.S. education system include placing laws and acts in order, developing programs, or simply training and educating teachers to better assist all of their students. Although the education system has come a long way in educating ELs from where it began, there are still programs that promote assimilation. Two of these are the submersion program, better known as the sink or swim model, and the subtractive bilingualism program (Brown, 2014). The submersion program was created in the 1960's and focuses on teaching ELs to acquire the English language and assimilate the United States culture. Meanwhile subtractive bilingualism basically forces out and belittles a students' first language and culture. It implies that students should leave their native culture at home and assimilate to the United States culture as quickly as possible. Students who emerge from these programs mention they felt excluded, discriminated against, and stereotyped from the rest of their peers.

In this article we explore and compare the concepts of assimilation and acculturation and how these two psychological changes have impacted underrepresented groups and second language acquisition. In addition, this

article showcases implications and teaching strategies to support acculturation best practices via culturally responsive teaching (CRT) in the second language classroom.

### **Assimilation and Acculturation**

Assimilation is defined as “changing aspects of one’s identity, including cultural identity, to fit societal standards” (Ali, 2020, p. 1). In a bilingual or ESL classroom, the use of assimilation would completely neglect the students’ cultural identity and refrain from using the strengths from their home language to further their second language acquisition (SLA). Assimilation does not retain the individual’s culture and forces them to conform to the dominant culture. During the assimilation process, the individual loses its cultural identity and is made to believe that their culture is inferior. Assimilation can be seen in many different ways throughout the educational system. For example, the classroom library only contains books in English that portray a specific race and the teacher only accepts the English language to be spoken in the classroom. For a student coming from a Spanish-speaking background, completely neglecting their first language creates a cultural shock due to the unfamiliarity with the American culture. The student may feel as though their personal experiences are not acceptable or validated. Assimilation in the classroom is detrimental to their individual identities and creates confusion for the student.

On the other hand, acculturation is defined as a process of cultural change, in which values, cultural traits, or characteristics of a new culture are being incorporated into an individuals’ lifestyle (García-Vázquez, 1995). This is a process that occurs in all age groups and is seen in differing nations, not only in the United States. Cultural learning such as learning a new language and modeling what other cultures are doing is part of the process of acculturation (National Center for Cultural Competence, n.d.). Along with behavioral adaptation as different cultures have different behaviors such as when it comes to directness, formality, enthusiasm, and personal disclosure (Wang, 2017). During the process of acculturation, individuals pick up aspects from a different culture of their own and incorporate parts into their own lives. Not only do changes of an individual such as values, attitudes, beliefs, and

identity occur, but changes in social and cultural systems as well. Acculturation can mostly be seen among immigrants, especially in the United States. In education, for students whose first language is not English, the “first major cultural trait in which students must acculturate” is to learn English (García-Vázquez, 1995, p. 307). This is an aspect that schools believe is critical, in order for students to be academically successful. Yet, for students to become literate in English, it should “not have to come at the expense of one’s culture, language, and identity” (García-Vázquez, 1995, p. 314). An assimilation is an extreme form of acculturation, yet people make the mistake of using the words interchangeably. The most obvious difference between both processes is that during acculturation, individuals’ original culture is retained, while in assimilation it is not (Brown, 2014).

### **Implications for Second Language Teaching**

Avoiding assimilation and focusing on acculturation is recommended for the bilingual and ESL classroom. Assimilation method can cause more harm than good in the learning process. According to McLaughlin (1992), “over the length of the program, children in bilingual classes, where there is exposure to the home language and to English, have been found to acquire English language skills equivalent to those acquired by children who have been in English-only programs”. Providing students with support from their home language and culture is actually not doing them a disservice or preventing them from learning any faster. In fact, McLaughlin continues, “the use of the home language in bilingual classrooms [actually] enables the child to avoid falling behind in schoolwork, and it also provides a mutually reinforcing bond between the home and the school” (p. 5). He mentions that the home provides a bridge for the students and thus encourages participation because the student feels more comfortable and understands what’s actually going on. In addition, it is important to deliver the message to EL parents that using home languages won’t hinder their child’s ability to learn English and will enhance the development of rich language experiences (Fenner, 2014).

Acculturation can be fulfilled with culturally responsive teaching (CRT). Gay (2017) described CRT as education using diverse students’ cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance

literacies to make learning experiences more relevant and effective. With culturally responsive techniques teachers can embrace multiculturalism in the classroom and make deeper connections with their ELL students. However, Gloria Ladson-Billings distinguishes between culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) and culturally relevant teaching. Ladson-Billings has three pillars of CRP that focus on multiple aspects of student achievement and aid students to boost their cultural identities. In an interview with Colleen Patrice Clark (2021), Ladson-Billings mentions that the three pillars are “student learning, cultural competence, and sociopolitical or critical consciousness” (p. 26). In this interview, she briefly explains that “student learning reflects the difference between what students know and are able to do when they arrive in a classroom in the fall and what they are able to do when they leave in the spring” (p. 26). Along with making sure that ESL and bilingual students are adequately learning a second language, teachers should also be focusing on their academic success, measuring progress, and making sure that their culturally diverse students are learning the same things that their traditional non-ESL students are. She then explains that “Cultural competence reflects students’ grounding in their culture of origin (i.e., language, customs, traditions, beliefs, etc.) while developing their fluency in another culture” (p. 26). Teachers should make sure they are assisting their students in developing positive multicultural and social identities by establishing a positive and welcoming environment in the classroom. She also mentions that students of the mainstream culture should “develop knowledge of and fluency in a culture beyond their own so they can better function in a diverse, multicultural, multilingual world” (p. 26). Teachers should be aware that CRP is not only beneficial for students that are a part of a cultural minority group or for any culturally diverse group, but also for traditional students. Samuels (2018) mentions that CRP is “...beneficial in relationship building, fostering cross-cultural understanding and inclusiveness, and influencing more diverse world views” (p. 26) in the classroom. Lastly, Clark (2021) asked Ladson-Billings to explain that “...sociopolitical or critical consciousness is the ability to solve real-life problems using the skills and knowledge school affords” (p. 26). All students, not just ELLs, bilingual, or other students from different cultural groups should be advocates for social change and teachers should prepare “...students to be citizens who are change agents,

active, engaged, and ready to participate in a diverse, democratic society” (p. 26). All students should be educated and prepared to recognize and take action against acts of social injustice, especially during these unprecedented times. The future of the world is at the hands of the upcoming generations and teachers should want to prepare them to fight for social change.

It is imperative for second language teachers to provide students with a sense of belonging in the classroom. Encouraging and embracing students’ cultures create a positive learning environment, in which students feel comfortable. Students learning a second language, such as English, already have to acculturate to the language. They should maintain their culture while learning a different one. Patterson (2017) called this additive or bicultural acculturation, and it is recommended for educators to support this type of acculturation in the classroom. This is an approach that is noted to be helpful for immigrant students and English language learners as well, in order to “lead healthier and more successful lives at school” (p. 8). These kinds of learners already have to endure the pressures of conforming to the adopted culture and in consonance with their original culture. Educators need to facilitate the acculturation process for ELL students and bring aspects from their culture into the classroom. Have students bring an object or dish from their culture and share with the class how it is representative or important to their culture. Another way to celebrate students’ culture is during free writing time and have them write stories of their home life and family holiday practices. They can draw pictures and students can volunteer to share in front of the class. Fellow students will gain an insight into their peer’s cultural traditions and become more accepting of other cultures. Educators can also hang a world map on a wall and have students “mark the countries from which their ancestors immigrated from” (Lynch, 2016, p. 8). Students will be left amazed to see how diverse the classroom is. These kinds of activities can make students, especially ELL students, feel included and embraced in the classroom.

During the second language acquisition process, the students need acculturation to create a positive learning environment. English language learners face a wide range of struggles such as language barriers, cultural differences, and negative preconceived notions. A student who is placed in an environment where they are told that the life and language they know is wrong will make them feel as

though they do not belong. Also, if the student struggles to assimilate to an English-only speaking classroom, they will be segregated from the rest of the students. Assimilation is a setback from the *Brown v Board of Education* decision that implies that all children should learn at the highest levels despite their racial backgrounds (Weinstein et al., 2004). If the teacher promotes assimilation in the classroom, they are preventing the student from reaching their highest potential because they will not be able to use their home language to strengthen their second language. To avoid assimilation practices in the classroom, teachers must create a diverse environment that fosters acculturation via culturally responsive teaching practices. The teacher should make it clear that individuality is important, and that each student brings a valuable aspect to the classroom as a whole. The main goal is to practice acculturation so that the student can gain confidence and celebrate their identity. The teacher can promote cultural diversity and awareness by allowing students to ask questions about why everybody has unique qualities and provide resources that are diverse such as books, music, and pictures.

### **Acculturation via Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Teachers have an important role “to create classrooms that will provide an effective educational experience for diverse populations” (Song, 2018, p. 9). An activity that fosters that experience in the classroom is having students share stories and information about their family’s culture. This can be seen as “an opportunity for all students to learn more about their [own] family’s cultures,” not only other students’ cultures (Song, 2018, p. 9). The activity is a project for students to conduct some research into their own “family’s cultures and stories about their parent’s childhoods” (Song, 2018, p. 9). Students may present orally with objects or pictures that resemble their cultures. They may also be creative and create a poster for their peers to visually gain an insight into their classmate’s culture. Students learning about their own culture provides “opportunities for children to acquire the skill and sensibilities...need[ed] for intercultural competence” (Song, 2018, p. 9). Such activities like this one make students feel embraced and represented in the classroom, along with feeling accepted “as qualified members of the community with knowledge, traditions, and arts experiences to share with children, teachers, and the community at large” (Song, 2018, p. 9). When presenting, students “learn how to

interact respectfully with others, how to learn from others, and how to listen” (Song, 2018, p. 9). This is an activity that not only allows students to learn about each other’s family’s cultures but also about their own culture, which allows for greater appreciation and acceptance of their culture.

Culturally responsive teaching will provide optimal learning in a multicultural setting by linking the curriculum to the students’ cultural identities. The teacher can create an environment that fosters cultural awareness “by educating themselves about the differences across and within cultures” (Byrd, 2016, p. 7). An activity that promotes acculturation in the classroom is having the students interview a parent or guardian and sharing their findings with the rest of the classroom. The teacher can provide a template with questions that will guide the conversation in a direction that ensures the student learns about their own culture. When the student is aware of their culture, the teacher can take this information and use it as an asset to create personalized instruction that is tailored to the student’s needs. Students will be able to learn about differences within their cultures and explore other cultures that may have similarities and differences. It is important for the students to learn about their classmates’ backgrounds in order to understand their traditions. The interview can be presented to the classroom through a poster or PowerPoint that analyzes the key findings and adds visuals such as their country’s flag, dishes, and celebrations. By incorporating this activity, the teacher exercises their use of culturally responsive teaching and creates a welcoming environment for the students, encouraging them to be proud of their culture. This activity also serves as an informational piece for the teacher to avoid stereotyping students based on their race and learn about their cultural practices.

One of the most popular techniques to use is to incorporate culturally relevant literacy such as reading, writing, technology, and oral language into the curriculum. Gloria Ladson-Billings mentions that “Literacy teachers have the opportunity to use texts, film, writing, and speaking to illustrate and explicate situations with which students are familiar” (Clark, 2021, p. 26). These resources can also help provide topics and events that most ELL and bilingual students can relate to. For example, bilingual books help ELL students better understand the text because they are learning how to read in English while using their

native language to help make connections. While they do this, they are also reinforcing their native language and literacy skills thus shaping the bilingual skills that will benefit them in the future. Bauer and Manyak (2008) mentioned that “Martinez-Rolan and Lopez-Robertson (2000) also found that open-ended literature discussions of culturally relevant books...revealed [the students’] ability to live through the experience of the text, make use of illustrations and text, explore social issues, and make connections to other texts (printed and oral) and life experiences” (p. 178). With the use of culturally relevant books, teachers are encouraging student engagement and helping their students develop a strong sense of meaning-making that enhances their understanding. It is not just reading the books that will help benefit ESL/bilingual students “García explained that teachers should accompany oral explanations and teacher read-alouds with visuals, realia, gestures, and dramatization to illustrate key concepts and vocabulary” (Bauer & Manyak 2008, p. 176). ESL students require that teachers scaffold them and help them build background knowledge so that the students can be confident enough to generate conversation and take risks when working as a whole class, with a partner, or individually. With this strategy, teachers are also encouraging acculturation because they are teaching their students about the mainstream culture while simultaneously reinforcing or teaching aspects of the less dominant culture. They are also using the students’ native language/culture as a tool to help them teach their students. To further encourage acculturation in a bilingual/ESL classroom with culturally relevant books, teachers can even have their students bring their own books or reading material to school. Students can then share and present it to the classroom. According to Lynch (2020), it “provides them [students] with an opportunity to both interact with and share stories, thoughts, and ideas that are important to their cultural and social perspective” (p. 3). This way, students feel comfortable embracing their culture at school and are more likely to hold on to their original traditions.

### Conclusion

We have concluded that the best possible implication would be that of cultural acculturation through culturally relevant teaching practices. Gloria Ladson-Billings

mentions that “Culturally relevant pedagogy is an approach to teaching that can show up in any discipline- literacy, mathematics, science, etc” (Clark, 2021, p. 26). Educators can implement it through all aspects of the curriculum. However, Samuels (2018) notes that CRP “...encourage[s] students to feel connected, included, and valued, but lead[s] to empowerment on behalf of students, helping them better understand and positively view both themselves and others; thereby inspiring them to maintain cultural identity and integrity” (p. 25). In other words, it is in an educator’s best interest to serve and support their ESL, bilingual, and all culturally diverse students with culturally relevant practices while promoting acculturation. All of our implications and strategies help support the positive development of SLA for ESL and bilingual students but most importantly, they engage students in meaning-centered interactions and help create language-rich classrooms. Teachers should avoid using assimilation techniques to help their students reach their highest potential and prevent them from encompassing a wide range of unfair and unequal learning experiences. Instead, teachers should celebrate cultural diversity by valuing each students’ differences, incorporating culturally relevant strategies, and allowing students to share their cultural identities.

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