

It's Only a Matter of Meaning: From English Learners (ELs) and Emergent Bilinguals (EBs) to Active Bilingual Learners/Users of English (ABLE)

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Abstract

Educational terms, labels, and categories can create binary thinking and societal polarisations that reify normative assumptions, status quo educational procedures, and inequitable educational experiences for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) youth in the United States (U.S.). We address the inequitable power relations that are created by deficit-based labels for CLD students, which lead to the misperceptions and misrepresentations of their active bilingualism, and propose a new term, “active bilingual learners/users of English (ABLE)”, that centralises students’ hybrid and holistic voices in their schooling contexts. We utilise a transdisciplinary approach to 1) distinguish ABLE students’ active bilingualism from the emergent bilingualism of L1 English-speaking students who study a foreign language, 2) defend the term bilingual as a metonym for bi/ multilingual learners, 3) demonstrate through cognitive linguistics the implicit impact of placing “learners/users” before what it is they are learning/ using in a label, and 4) analyse the potential positive influence of the acronym ABLE on the educational experiences of these students. Deficit-based terms are concrete examples of dichotomy-based conceptualisation strategies that uphold normative ideologies and practices of viewing students in the United States as English-speakers vs. non-English-speakers, successful vs. unsuccessful, real Americans vs. non-citizens, and normal vs. other. In its essence, ABLE is a hybrid term that acknowledges both CLD students’ active bilingualism and their real need to develop English. Hybrid dialogues are needed to address the above conceptual dichotomies in education and transcend binary thinking that determines who is ABLE to be bilingual and successful in the U.S.