

Claire Darmstadter

Hey everybody I am joined today by Heather Linville, Associate Professor and TESOL Director at UW- La Crosse and board member of Wisconsin TESOL. Thank you for taking a few minutes to chat with me!

Heather Linville

Absolutely! It's my pleasure to be here.

Claire Darmstadter

So TESOL stands for teaching english to speakers of other languages. There are tons of acronyms in education, so we just want to avoid any confusion!

Before we dive into your work and background, it would be great if we could break down a couple more acronyms, some of the commonly used terms in English language education and what significance they may carry. Oftentimes we focus on the deficit, so the fact that a student lacks certain English skills, rather than the asset that they already speak one or more languages, and the way we refer to these students can negatively impact their self-perceptions and how society as a whole views them. If I list off a couple different ones can you give us some context of their origin and what meaning they may convey?

Heather Linville

Sure, absolutely!

Claire Darmstadter

Sweet, so the first is LEP which stands for limited english proficiency

Heather Linville

Yeah, so that is definitely an older term. You'll still see it come up. For example, if you are looking at school report cards, even as recently as probably 3 or 4 years ago, the government recording was limited english proficient when talking about the percentage of students in your schools who were English learners, which is a preferred term now. And I think you're right, limited english proficiency does focus on what students lack, which we would like to move away from. So that's definitely not a preferred term these days.

Claire Darmstadter

So you hinted at this a little bit. The next one is ELL which stands for English language learner and EL which stands for English learner. Is there a difference between the two terms, or are they pretty interchangeable?

Heather Linville

I would say at this point in time you'll still see both of those used. The US Department of Education has moved to the term English Learner and that has been a very solid shift to that term, but you'll still see English Language Learner a lot, even in publications that are very recent. I think the shift there was just recognizing that people are learning English — well, I don't

actually know if I can speak super knowledgeable on this — it's one word difference; maybe it recognizes that everybody is a language learner. You and I, even as native speakers of English, we continue to learn the language as we go into different fields or continue reading, like we're all language learners essentially. So I think that was really the main shift. English Learner is definitely the preferred term these days, especially for the department of education. English language learners are still very common.

Claire Darmstadter

Right, so next we have ESL and this stands for English second language and this often refers to a class, but you'll also hear "an ESL kid" or "a kid in ESL."

Heather Linville

Yes, and this is going to vary by region. So I came from the East Coast, I was in Maryland for many years, and out there we refer to the program or the class as ESOL, English, I guess to Speakers of Other Languages, coming here to this part of the country, here in Wisconsin, or at least the La Crosse region, people talk about ELL as the class, and even sometimes the teacher is the ELL teacher. ESL I feel like is the more universal term, that's English as a Second Language. That can refer to the class, but you can also say that person is the ESL teacher. I think there is lots of variety there.

Claire Darmstadter

And our last one is EB which stands for emergent bilingual, and this one I don't feel like is as popular or as well-known by other people.

Heather Linville

This one isn't. It hasn't really been picked up I would say by like the Department of Education, but emergent bilingual 100% is that asset-based perspective where you're saying here's a person who already speaks a language from multiple languages, and they're adding another language as they learn English. Another one that is also gaining some traction but is not well-known yet is multilingual learner. So, the acronym ML instead of EL. Again, those terms are very positive and really shed a light on who students are, but they haven't gained a lot of traction yet.

Claire Darmstadter

Great, I really appreciate you for taking a few minutes to run us through that. I think oftentimes people who don't centrally work in this field may unintentionally use antiquated or perhaps deficit-centered language without realizing it, and then if they're corrected it may shut them down with important conversations about these topics because they are scared of making an error again. Do you have any general advice for people as they speak about these topics related to English language acquisition, especially when for so long English has been used as a language of dominance and power?

Heather Linville

Yeah, absolutely. I think as somebody who on my side sort of has expertise in the field, when I am talking to folks and these use antiquated words as you said or they say something that just really isn't based in what we know currently about English Learners, I just try to frame it as *oh, we use this term nowadays*, so again like you said, not trying to shut anybody down. It's the same thing if someone says Indian instead of indigenous person. *Oh, that's a term that we no longer use, we are more aware and use this other term now as more reflective of our understanding and respect of whatever group of people*. I think the other thing that happens with language learning, language teaching, talking about languages, absolutely everybody uses a language, absolutely everybody has that tool, but there are a lot of things that we, that a person who hasn't studied about teaching and learning languages just wouldn't know. And so you hear a lot of myths like children learn languages better than adults. Well, there are some caveats to that. Or, immersion in whatever language you are trying to learn is the best method. Well, not necessarily. So, just recognizing that our general understanding of languages and language learning and teaching is based on common sense understanding, but it doesn't necessarily reflect what we know through research.

Claire Darmstadter

And I think an important point is to assume positive intent by these people who may not be centrally working or involved in this field and help them reach a point where they have a more nuanced understanding or can interact with it and a more respectful way. So now let's talk about your work! Could you provide a bit of a background on your own education and what your experience with language has been? I know you have taught in a lot of different states and countries, which I think gives you a unique perspective for working here in Wisconsin.

Heather Linville

Yeah, sure. So I started out as an undergraduate. I was a Spanish major, and I had an English linguistics minor, as well as a music minor, randomly. But, after that, my plan was actually to go to graduate school for Spanish, but I decided to take a year off. I was a nanny for a year in Washington D.C. During that time I volunteered teaching English as a Second Language to adults in a community program and I fell in love with it. And in the back of my mind I had always thought I wanted to be a teacher, but I had pushed that down, said *no, I can strive for more*, which speaks to our negative view of teachers in our society, but that passion was rekindled I would say. And so after that experience, I did start teaching Spanish in a middle school in Baltimore City. And through that experience I discovered that I really loved teaching English, I loved sharing my own language with another group of people, and so I moved into ESL teaching, and I taught adults for a long time through the community college in Baltimore City. But that journey led me to a master's degree, it led me to teach abroad as you mentioned. I worked in Panama, Mexico, and Indonesia. I was in two of those countries through the English Language Fellow program, through the Department of State, which is a fantastic program. It gave me a lot of professional opportunities and it also pushed me into teacher training, teacher education. So, preparing other people to teach English as a second or foreign language. And so when I came back to the states, I worked in an English language center, which was international students wanting to learn English, and at the same time I pursued my PhD. And I also during that time moved to American University, worked in their master's-level TESOL program for a

time, and then came here to La Crosse, and I have been super happy here. My work focuses on undergraduates who are preparing to teach in our public schools. Some of them are preparing to teach general education, like to be a third grade teacher, and also want to teach English Learners, but some of them are focused just on teaching English Learners. And some of them want to teach abroad which is really fantastic too.

Claire Darmstadter

And I know on your profile page and a couple other areas you talk about how you focus specifically on advocacy and how these teachers can advocate for these students. So what led you to having this perspective and focus, and what do you do to achieve this aim with your work?

Heather Linville

It's kind of interesting. When I started doing teacher education in the United States, we have a set of standards that many states, not all, but many states follow. And these standards say that teachers of English learners should be advocates for their learners. And I was like this really resonates with me, first of all, it makes a lot of sense. But, it also opened up just a ton of questions, like what do we mean by advocate? What are we asking teachers to do? Are teachers aware that this is part of our expectation? And that led me to my PhD research which is very bottom line, teachers of English Learners do understand that is part of their role and they do that. I did survey research and had over 500 participants with 99% of them saying yes, advocacy is part of my role. So that was really exciting to me, and I definitely brought that lens with me to La Crosse. Especially, you know, Maryland is a place where there are many more multilingual speakers, much more linguistic diversity. Coming here to La Crosse, I feel like a lot of my work is advocacy, raising awareness that we have people who are not native speakers of English, that it is a benefit to be bilingual, it's positive to have that linguistic diversity in our community. And, then the other side of that, so just my own being here and talking to people I feel like is advocacy. But, I also teach a class to most of our education majors here at the University that is focused on raising awareness of who English learners are, instilling in our future teachers a positive view of linguistic diversity, and giving them some of the skills and tools they need to be able to work with English learners. So that course to me is my biggest piece of advocacy. I love teaching it, I love having students go through it and really have some of those "a-ha" moments. Like *oh, I didn't realize that more than 50% of people in the world basically are bilingual.*

Claire Darmstadter

And there are tons of teachers who find themselves working with EL students without having specific preparation, they can't take your course, they don't speak the language of the students they work with. Are there any general tips that can lead to more positive, productive interactions between the teacher and student or the teacher and the family?

Heather Linville

Yeah, absolutely. I would say first of all one myth is that you have to speak the language of your students to be able to teach them, and that is not true. It is a benefit, it certainly can help, but it's

not true. We have a lot of situations where you have a classroom of 20 students, 5 EL from two different language backgrounds. Well, no teacher is going to speak English and in this part of the world Spanish and Hmong. That would be rare, although I think I do have a person in my classes now who speaks those three languages, but it's rare. So you don't have to speak the language of your students. There are two things we want to focus on. I think the field of TESOL has done a really good job of getting out this idea of strategies to help English Learners understand instruction. So we use visuals, we use gestures, we use captions if we are showing a video. All of these things that support our English Learners to understand what is happening in the classroom. And that's fantastic. I would encourage any teacher who has English Learners to keep going with that. But the other side of it, the other piece of the puzzle, is that we have to give English learners the tools to also be able to produce the language. You can't just understand the language. That's half of it, and in a classroom certainly that is a big half of it, a big chunk, but you also have to have the tools to produce the language. And so that's where you may see things like vocabulary word banks, vocabulary walls, sentence starters, sentence frames or templates, graphic organizers, all of those supports that help English Learners be able to put together the language as they are learning it to engage fully in the classroom.

Claire Darmstadter

Right, for sure. And you know the great thing is that it doesn't just help these English Language learner students. Students who are monolingual English speakers can benefit from this as well, so it's not like a detriment to the other students. So you also serve as a board member on WITESOL, but also are involved with TESOL international. Could you share just a little bit about your role within these organizations and perhaps how other educators can get involved with or benefit from the services and work that they do?

Heather Linville

Sure, and I would say one more thing about working with English language learners in school, I would encourage any teachers out there, seek out the English Learner teacher, the ESL teacher in the building, because that person has the training, has the background, and I guarantee you will be more than happy to work with any teacher in the building to better serve the English Learner. In terms of professional organizations, TESOL International, which as the name implies is our international organization. I've been really fortunate. I've had some opportunities at the beginning of my career to go to conferences. I have even been able to present at the international conference early in my career, which sort of gave me a boost in wanting to be a part of the organization. Most recently, I was working with the standards professional council. So I mentioned to you my interest in standards, and so I have worked with that particular part of TESOL International, looking at standards, revising standards, things like that for our field. But I also really believe in working locally, working in the local community. And so Wisconsin TESOL, which I'll be honest, I pronounce "Why" [WI] TESOL, but any other person you talk to is going to have a different pronunciation of it, "Wih" TESOL, I can't even remember the other ones. But anyway, working with that group has been really wonderful. I learned about the group almost instantly upon arriving in the state, and just recently became the member at large for the western side of the state. And so that has been really great. We got a grant from Wisconsin TESOL last year, well actually in the fall, to bring a professional development opportunity to this

part of the region on co-teaching, collaboration between general education teachers and ESL teachers, and I've presented at conferences. I actually was the conference co-chair or something like that a few years ago, so yeah, I really believe in this field we need to stay active and we need to stay involved with each other in order to do the best in education for our focus population which is English Learners.

Claire Darmstadter

And finally last question: we tell our kids a lot that being multilingual is a superpower, so can you give me one reason why you think that's true?

Heather Linville

Oh yes, how many can I give you? So I learned Spanish, I think it's just an amazing experience to be able to enter into the world of another group of people through language. So you know I could be dropped anywhere in Central or South America or Spain and be able to communicate with people which is phenomenal. And also I was listening to a song the other day, and all of a sudden there was some Spanish in it, and I was like oh, I can understand that. And I would also say the benefits of bilingualism don't mean you have to be technically bilingual, that term is sort of tossed around a lot for what it means. Is there an on and off switch? No. It's a range of proficiency. But even a little bit of proficiency in the language really helps you to make connections and to see things from a different point of view.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure! Professor Heather Linville has published lots of fantastic work about ELs, so I will include some of those in the transcript for our listeners to check out if they'd like to learn a little bit more. Thank you so much for speaking with me today and have a great rest of the semester!

Heather Linville

Yeah, thank you so much. It's been a pleasure.