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## Artifact in Action 2: Writing a Linguistic Autobiography

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## Artifact in Action 2 · Writing a Linguistic Autobiography

Amy A. Weimer



Increased discussion about bilingual and biliterate instruction are needed among educators at all levels. Ideally, bilingual learners can be supported from birth into adulthood, but this will require much more communication among educators than is happening now. To take a deep look into an idealistic future, though, requires first reflecting on our past.

In the past, bilingual learners were ridiculed for their lack of English-speaking abilities. Oral histories from elders reveal that hurtful verbal and physical abuse by peers and school personnel endured during childhood has had lasting effects. These storytellers describe a time only a generation ago when principals would spank children for speaking Spanish in the hallways or playground at school, teachers watered down content for any of the Spanish speaking children, despite their propensity for achievement, and Pan American University required students with strong Spanish accents to take English language assessments prior to admission. In one compelling tale, a student recalled being asked to change his name so that it might “sound more American” and be more easily pronounced, save nothing of his identity.

Presently, it is clear that we have progressed since those times, but the memories still sting in the hearts and minds of grandparents and parents who face the challenges of embracing a new way of educating that includes celebrating heritage language and traditions. Not surprisingly, some cannot accept this new approach and therefore resist practices of teaching content in both languages, despite mounting evidence of its effectiveness. We must consider this when engaging in discourse about the future of bilingualism in our community. Many current decision-makers about bilingual education in South Texas’ Rio Grande Valley have deeply held beliefs. Our discussions need to be gentle but provocative two-way conversations during which we each listen and learn from one another. By convening a community of educators, our Center for Bilingual Studies has made progress. Several school districts have taken steps toward implementing curriculum and instructional approaches that have proven effectiveness for bilingual learners and more are eager.

In the future, we envision a community like what we have seen in Ottawa (a bilingual English/French Canadian city), but that celebrates our own cultural heritage, language, and families. We look to a day when monolingual freshmen can enter the new UTRGV (opening its doors in fall 2015) and matriculate as fully bilingual, biliterate individuals, empowered with the cognitive, academic, and comprehensive skills necessary to compete globally. We have been inspired by Ottawa, where schools offer eighty percent of courses in both languages, allow students to submit assignments and exams in either language, and celebrate the bicultural heritage of the region. Yet we realize that to feed the university we envision, we must refine the surrounding

community of learners. Several strategies have proven effective in higher education from which we can draw.

In our own classrooms, we have seen the usefulness of providing culturally-affirming curriculum, encouraging students to speak Spanish during cooperative learning peer group activities and/or formal presentations, and requiring service learning activities that embed students within our bilingual community so that they can not only apply learned content to practical application, but gain knowledge from community members and experiences that could never have been acquired in the classroom. For example, ten to twelve psychology students presented a formal research symposium about a study they conducted on bilingual children's academic success. After this talk, many of the audience members began a discussion about their own experiences acquiring language(s) in the Valley. It led to the development of a classroom assignment for psychology students requiring students to write their own linguistic autobiography, reflecting on the challenges and advantages of teaching bilingual learners.

### **Assignment(s)**

Reflect on and detail your experiences with language acquisition. Describe the types of (language) instruction you've had and the feelings you developed during interactions with teachers, school staff, and peers at school about the use of language. If you're monolingual, reflect on what it might be like to acquire a second language. If you're bilingual (or multilingual), how has your understanding of multiple languages shaped your perspective. Finally, try to connect your experiences with topics in child development from our class. What insights do you reach about how cultural context shapes language development?

While this assignment was specifically designed for a child development course for college-students in psychology, it could easily be modified to fit other classrooms and to meet a variety of levels of learners. Other potential assignments include keeping an on-going assessment or diary of languages experiences, interviewing elders in the community to gain an oral history of their experiences regarding language acquisition, and developing a research paradigm for investigating language acquisition in bilingual children.