

# The Effect of Differing Types of ESL and Bilingual Education Programs on Teacher-Student Relationships

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One of the most commonly cited purposes of education is to provide equal opportunity for all students, regardless of factors such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. One factor that may be difficult to account for in this initiative, however, is a student's native language. For decades, researchers have devoted large amounts of time and resources into studying and implementing programs designed to educate recent immigrants and other English Language Learners, who make up nearly a quarter of public school enrollment in some states (NCES, 2016). As the number of individuals in the United States who speak a language other than English at home continues to rise, the question of how best to educate ELL students becomes ever more salient.

Bardack (2010) described three main forms of programs for ELL students. The first type is English as a Second Language (ESL) pullout, which combines mainstream classroom instruction with scheduled "pull-out" sessions that focus on the English language. Early-exit bilingual programs provide initial instruction in a student's first language, then transition to English-only instruction, finally integrating students into mainstream classes within one to two years. Finally, dual language programs combine ELL students and English speakers in the same classroom. In these courses, part of the curriculum is taught in English, and the other part is taught in the ELL students' language. Although amount of instruction in each language varies, students in this type of program will emerge with language and literacy skills in both languages.

Numerous studies spanning several years have examined both the short-term and long-lasting effects of ESL and bilingual education programs, often focusing on academic performance as a means of measuring success. For example, multiple studies find that ongoing inclusion of a student's native language positively impacts their English language abilities and overall academic achievement (Bialystok, 2001; Carrasquillo & Rogríguez, 2002; Cummins, 1986; Fulton-Scott & Calvin, 1983; Lindholm, 1991; Nicolay & Poncelet, 2012). A few select studies have examined other differences that emerge between programs, such as differences in classroom environment and teacher expectations (Rodríguez, Carrasquillo, and Lee, 2014; Fredericks & Warriner, 2016; Nieto, 1994; McKown & Weinstein, 2008; Van den Bergh et al, 2010; Turner et al, 2015). However, few studies have specifically targeted the question of the impact of language program type on teacher-student relationships. This is significant because these relationships impact student performance in a variety of ways, especially in students who may have trouble adapting in a mainstream classroom, such as English Language Learners (Klem & Connell, 2004; Baker, Grant, & Morlock, 2008). In addition, positive teacher-student interactions prepare students for future engagements with authority figures, allowing them to feel comfortable asking for help, developing "mentoring relationships," or establishing networking opportunities (Jack, 2016).

## Method

In order to examine how different types of ESL and bilingual education programs affect teacher-student relationships, I decided to conduct qualitative interviews with students who had participated in one of the three types of programs at some point before entering high school. The main question to be answered through these interviews was whether or not programs that include a student's native language, such as bilingual education programs, significantly impact a student's interactions with their teachers, particularly as they relate to approaching teachers for help with academics and other resources, such as letters of recommendation. In other words, this study aimed to understand the effect of different types of ESL programs on students' abilities to form positive, constructive relationships with teachers and other school faculty. The open-ended nature of the interviews also allowed for exploration of other long-lasting effects of different types of ESL programs, such as a possible stigma around their students.

Overall, I conducted extensive interviews with ten undergraduates at the University of Minnesota who met the following criteria: first, they must have completed an ESL or bilingual education program at some point during their K-8 education; second, they must have spoken a language other than English at home both before and during their program. Participants varied on their current level of both English and their native languages. I began each interview by asking several questions to clarify which type of program the student participated in. Through this, I learned that eight students had participated in an ESL pullout program and two had gone through bilingual education programs. A few students had spent time in two types of programs, but I classified them according to which program they participated in the longest. I did not interview any students who completed an early-exit bilingual program. I also asked students about the length of time spent they in the program, and during what grades the program took place.

I then opened the conversation up to discuss the student's interactions with teachers, advisors, and faculty at three levels of their education: during their ESL program, during high school, and in college. Following the example of an article exploring how social class impacts teacher-student interactions, I kept this portion of the interview very open ended so participants could highlight their most salient experiences (Jack 2016). I did make a note to ask participants directly about how they overcome challenges in school, both in the past and now. I paid particular attention to whether or not there was a change between time periods, and if so, what facilitated that change. Finally, I allowed the participant to freely discuss their experiences in school in general, including what they find difficult, what they enjoy studying, and how various groups they are involved in affect their experiences. This open discourse allowed me to understand the participant's overall experience in school, and how their English language program may have affected this.

## Results

Based on findings related to the academic and social benefits of bilingualism, my original hypothesis was that inclusion of a student's native language and culture contributes to their comfort in the classroom and during interactions with teachers. If this were true, students who completed bilingual education programs would report interactions with teachers that were both more frequent and more constructive. This pattern was not evident in the responses I gathered. Students in all types of programs reported both positive and negative interactions with their teachers. Students in similar ESL programs also varied in important aspects of relationship building, such as their tendency to ask their teachers for help: some students felt more comfortable asking questions while others preferred to figure issues out on their own. This indicates that inclusion of a student's native language alone does not necessarily improve a student's interactions with their teachers.

Despite there being no clear relationship between native language use in ESL programs and a student's interactions with teachers, other aspects of a program and its faculty can contribute to or hinder a student's comfort with their teachers and in school more generally. This comfort appears to play a role in a student's willingness to ask for help and begin to develop constructive relationships with their instructors.

### *ESL Pullout Programs*

All respondents who completed ESL pullout programs described at least one positive interaction and constructive relationship with a faculty member. Often times, these relationships were initiated by the student. However, the interactions that students initiated differed in both frequency and type. I found that there were three categories of common interactions between students and faculty. First, students may approach faculty to get help with an assignment, ask questions related to course content, or address other academic issues. Students may also ask professors and advisors for extra resources, like letters of recommendation or help with a special project. Finally, students may feel comfortable discussing personal matters with faculty, such as their family or cultural background. Of the ESL pullout students I interviewed, only a few had approached a professor for extra projects like research, and even fewer had a faculty member that they felt comfortable discussing personal matters with.

Overall, there was no clear pattern suggesting that students who completed ESL pullout programs are more or less comfortable during interactions with teachers, professors, and other faculty. Some students had no reservations approaching teachers at all levels of their education. Latoya<sup>1</sup>, a freshman, was unafraid to ask for help or to let her teacher know she didn't understand something. What's more, when she was continually placed in ESL classes, Latoya approached several of her teachers and counselors and requested to be moved to a more advanced class.

I would complain to teachers, faculty, and even my parents because they were placing me in classes that they think I need without asking me or even letting me know... I was very straightforward with them.

Latoya was very confident in her interactions with teachers and was easily able to advocate for herself. This may be because she began ESL early in her education and felt comfortable with the English language from a young age. Overall, it does not appear that her ESL pullout program negatively impacted her relationships with teachers later on.

Most respondents did not show the same confidence as Latoya; all students differed widely in their interactions with faculty. Often times, a student's comfort interacting with teachers depended on several factors related to the faculty member rather than the student themselves. Many respondents said that a teacher's personality and teaching style were highly important in their ability to build a relationship with them. When asked about their favorite faculty members, respondents often described teachers who place an emphasis on learning, relate coursework to real-world issues, and "genuinely care about their students". These characteristics make students feel more comfortable around their teachers and allow for further relationship building. Allison, a sophomore, found that although she interacted with all her teachers on a needs-basis, there are certain individuals that she "clicks with". This initial connection makes Allison feel more comfortable approaching those individuals for help or additional resources, like research opportunities and letters of recommendation.

Multiple students described faculty members' background as influential to their relationships as well. Many felt stronger connections with faculty members of color or those who came from unique cultural backgrounds. This connection seemed to be particularly strong if a teacher shared the student's racial and ethnic background. Daniel, a freshman, mentioned an academic advisor who made his transition to college easier and helps him to feel more comfortable on campus.

He understands where I'm coming from, because he, too, is Hmong... I just feel more comfortable with people like him.

Other students described strong connections they had with teachers who were also people of color, even if they did not share the same racial or ethnic background. Maria, a freshman, mentioned that one of her favorite teachers was one that she "resonated with" because "she was from a different culture as well." Although this teacher did not speak Maria's native language, she felt comfortable with her and developed a strong relationship with her. Thus, if an ESL program cannot provide all students with a teacher or assistant that speaks their native language, hiring teachers of color may help the students feel more comfortable both with particular faculty members and in the overall classroom.

By contrast, having a teacher that is not familiar with a student's native culture can negatively impact interactions with them. Elena, a sophomore, described her experience in an

ESL pullout classroom where she and her sister were the only two students of Latvian background in an ESL pullout class that consisted largely of Hispanic and Hmong students. While their teachers could speak Spanish and Hmong and “knew how to deal with” those students, Elena and her sister often felt out of place and somewhat neglected by their teachers who knew very little about their culture.

Since we weren't a language that came up frequently, if we had a problem, they didn't always know how to deal with us. If we said something, and they didn't understand what we were saying, it would be just very confusing on both ends... It sucked because they knew how to deal with other children, but with us, there was this barrier... It definitely felt like we were being forced to do a lot [individually].

Although she liked her teachers, the barriers and “isolation” that Elena experienced in her ESL class led her to be highly independent in the classroom. She explained that she and her sister often had to figure things out by themselves, a practice that she continued even after she exited ESL. To overcome a problem or difficult assignment today, for example, she said she is more likely to “just keep working at it” rather than attending office hours, limiting the number of interactions with her professors or teaching assistants.

A final factor that impacts whether or not a student interacts or builds relationships with faculty is a teacher's availability. For many students, the teachers they connected with in high school made themselves available after school hours or established set times for students to ask questions and get help with schoolwork. Extracurricular activities provided another opportunity for students to connect with teachers, who may serve as coaches or sponsors. Metric, a senior, liked that her ESL teachers also taught more advanced classes and remained available to her as a resource, saying that “there was always help wherever I need it”. In both high school and college, Metric also had a College Possible coach that helped her apply to college, register for classes, and more. However, in contrast to her teachers in high school, Metric disliked the inconsistency of coaching when she entered college.

We get a new coach every year, [and] I don't really like that because I like to build a long-term relationship with my coach.

Because her previous coach was unavailable to her, Metric felt that she was unable to deeply engage with her highly valuable resource. She said that since she already got into college and knows the “process” of school, she doesn't seek out her new coach beyond the few meetings that are required each year.

In addition to experiences like being assigned to a new coach, other factors can impact the availability of faculty at the university level. Class size is a significant factor that was mentioned by several respondents. Many felt that large lectures make it more difficult to form relationships with their professors, especially if they are not one of the “top students”. This has led students like Tyler, a junior, to avoid interacting with professors at times.

Tyler: I only met one professor through my college years. I was struggling in that class. I barely meet with my professors. If I don't need to meet them, I'm not going to. I just ask the students in there, or someone who has taken that course.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Tyler: I don't know, I just felt like since they have too many students, I felt, like, afraid to ask. I don't want to bother them.

Although Tyler had strong relationships with multiple teachers and counselors in high school, he interacted with college professors far less frequently, partly because of the large class sizes. Thus, it was not his elementary school ESL program that impacted his comfort with teachers, but overall circumstance.

The difference in perceived availability of faculty in high schools and at the university level impacted multiple respondents in this way. Several ESL pullout students said that rather than ask a professor or TA, they were more likely to consult the internet or "individually figure out" problems or questions they had for assignments. A few viewed scheduled meeting times, like office hours, as "awkward" or reserved for specific questions about course content. Although this prevented some students from ever attending office hours, others found ways to get past the initial awkwardness. Elena, for example, "finds an excuse for the first one or two" meetings, and then "just goes to talk."

Overall, there was no clear pattern in interaction style or the strength of relationships that ESL pullout students had with teachers. All respondents described one or more teachers or counselors with whom they had positive relationships. Some, but not all, students had approached a faculty member for help with a project outside of class, such as a research project. Although several of these students described themselves as highly independent and individual, making them less likely to approach faculty for help, this pattern was not consistent across all ESL pullout students. Rather, factors related to teachers' personalities, teaching styles, and classroom circumstances appear to be important in determining the frequency and type of these interactions.

### *Bilingual Education Programs*

Both students that I interviewed who completed a bilingual education program were highly likely to approach faculty for a variety of needs. Riley, a freshman, mentioned attending the office hours of several Teaching Assistants in order to get help with difficult homework assignments. When Sarah, a senior, has a question or difficult assignment in school, she said that "reaching out to faculty" is the first step she takes to overcome the challenge. These answers differed from the majority of respondents who completed ESL pullout programs, who were much more likely to consult the internet or "individually figure stuff out". Sarah also participated in additional activities with faculty, including starting a student organization and completing a

research project. These activities required Sarah to reach out to and work one-on-one with professors, some of whom she had never met before. Her work in these projects not only helped her to succeed academically, but also provided her with strong relationships with multiple faculty members who she can now approach for resources like letters of recommendation.

Knowing that she wanted to attend graduate school and would need faculty recommendations, Sarah was aware of the “initiative” she had to take in order to meet her professors and build relationships with them. When asked if her bilingual education program helped her become more comfortable in school and approaching teachers, she said yes, but wasn’t sure exactly what about the program did this.

I feel like it almost builds self esteem. Elementary students are doing this awesome thing: learning to talk [in two languages]. I always remember parents or teachers thinking it’s so awesome that I speak another language at that young age... That promotion and assurance of self worth might be lacking in a non bilingual program.

Although Sarah’s insight is consistent with my original thoughts about bilingual education programs, she was not the only respondent who feels comfortable approaching faculty on more than just a basic “needs-basis”. As mentioned above, students like Latoya didn’t hesitate to tell teachers, professors, and counselors about her needs and dissatisfaction with her classes. I also showed that several factors related to faculty themselves, including personality, teaching style, cultural background, and availability also largely impact the interactions and relationships between faculty and their students.

### *Effect of Additional Resources for Students*

Because I wanted to know whether the type of a student’s ESL program affects the way they interact with their teachers, I paid special attention to the way they approached teachers throughout their education and whether this approach changed over time. If a student did describe a change in their interactions, I asked them what they believed facilitated the change. Responses varied greatly among the students and revealed the importance of additional resources for English Language Learners. Several students had programs like College Possible and Breakthrough Twin Cities to help them with applying for college and high school in general. In addition to coaching students through tasks like completing the FAFSA, these programs help students succeed in subtler ways as well. As Tyler described, a program that he joined in middle school helped him start thinking about higher education and taking the steps necessary to getting into college, notably interacting with faculty that could help him throughout the application process.

[Without the program,] I don't think I would have done as well, or been as ready for high school and college. I wouldn't seek help from my teachers and counselors more. Being in that program helped me want to establish a foundation of support for myself.

With a new focus on getting into college, Tyler began to visit his counselor nearly every week starting in his sophomore year of high school. This provided him with access to application assistance, scholarship and volunteer opportunities, and an overall strong relationship with a faculty member.

Other students described particular interactions with faculty members that encouraged them to seek additional help and provided them with confidence in later interactions. Daniel described a speaker that came to his middle school and motivated him to seek help from teachers more often. Latoya had a teacher in high school who consistently encouraged her to speak up during class discussions, which pushed her to stick up for herself and defend her ideas, both inside and out of the classroom. Jenna, a sophomore, had an advisor in college that provided her with useful resources, presented her with many options for classes, and was an overall approachable person. Jenna explained that this positive experience made her more comfortable asking for help from other advisors she encountered later on. Looking at these experiences, we can see that bilingual education programs may not be the only resource available to help students gain confidence and feel comfortable interacting with faculty members throughout their education.

## **Discussion**

Multiple studies have shown the extensive academic, social, and personal benefits of bilingualism. Students who maintain or improve their native language while learning English experience higher test scores, better grades, increased self-esteem, and stronger connections with their family and communities (Portes 2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 2008). Scholars have also found that the way schools and teachers view a student's language, whether as an asset or an impediment to their learning, plays a role in ELL student achievement as well (Nieto, 1992). Unfortunately, due to many political and economic factors, dual-language education programs that promote bilingualism are unavailable to a large number of English Language Learners in the United States. Rather, students are split among a variety of programs, most commonly ESL Pullout programs, early-exit bilingual programs, and dual language immersion.

With this study, I aimed to examine how these different types of ESL and bilingual education programs impact the way that students interact with teachers, professors, counselors, and other school faculty throughout their education. Knowing the multitude of benefits that bilingualism has for students, particularly those related to self-esteem, I hypothesized that students who complete a program that includes instruction in their native language will feel more comfortable in the classroom and during interactions with teachers. This would lead to students reporting more initiative in their interactions and relationship building with faculty throughout



their education. To test this hypothesis, I carried out in-depth interviews with undergraduates who completed an ESL program earlier in their education.

Through these interviews, I did not find clear evidence to support my original idea. All students reported having at least one positive interaction and relationship with a faculty member at some point in their education. Students differed widely in their strategies to solve problems related to coursework or their education overall, with some students being highly independent and others not hesitating to consult a faculty member for help. Respondents in both types of programs had initiated multiple interactions with faculty members; a select few had approached a teacher for help with a special project, letter of recommendation, or even personal matters. Across all types of ESL programs, two patterns related to student-teacher interactions emerged. First, many factors related to faculty, including their personality, racial and ethnic background, and availability all play a role in students' comfort approaching an individual faculty member. Students may or may not "click" with a certain professor or counselor, which I found to be significant in determining whether a relationship would form. Second, the majority of students described a program, faculty member, or other experience that influenced their comfort in school and encouraged them to seek help from authority figures. For some students, a bilingual education program helped establish a foundation of confidence for this task.

There are a few important limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged. First, the sample size is very small and consists only of undergraduate students at one institution. This not only limits this study's generalizability, but also greatly impacts the nature of the results gathered. All respondents were accepted to and currently attend college. There are many more U.S. students who completed ESL programs who chose not to attend college, did not get accepted, or did not complete high school. These students likely had far different experiences with teachers and other faculty that are not represented in the results of this study. I also did not compare these respondents to non-ELL students who took mainstream classes throughout their education. Doing so would be useful to determine whether ESL programs actually have an impact on teacher-student interactions, or if both ELL and non-ELL students learn to solve issues in school and interact with teachers in similar ways. Finally, because of the qualitative nature of my study, I was able to explore trends in the long-lasting effects of ESL programs but not the causal mechanisms of these effects. Because of these limitations, both qualitative and quantitative studies related to this issue should be conducted in the future. If successful in showing the positive impacts of one type of program over another, this research could serve as a useful tool to the parents, educators, and policymakers who play influential roles in the education of ELL students across the nation.

## **Notes**

1. All names are pseudonyms that were either chosen by the respondent or assigned by the researcher.

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