National Association of Educational Translators and Interpreters of Spoken Languages

Guide for Spoken Language Interpreters in Education Series

Language Access and Equal Footing: A Personal Perspective

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Social, political, cultural and linguistic forces shape the complexity of multilingual communication in English- dominant spaces such as K-12 settings. These forces become even more evident with emergent bilingual families whose children are identified as eligible to receive special education services. Language intersects with other marginalized identities, including ableism, ethnicity, race, class and education, in ways that compound marginalization. Even though in many countries where English is not the dominant language, special education looks very different, if it even exists, emergent bilingual families living in the U.S. are expected to be involved in the special education process, ask questions, support their children at home, and provide informed consent to evaluations and services that they may not fully understand.

Per federal language access policies, including the Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), and guidance from the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice, "reasonable measures must be taken to provide information to families in their

language of preference (USDOJ, n.d.). Reasonable measures can include phone or in-person interpreters, translated materials, and access to essential information related to student discipline, special education assessments and school programs in the languages most represented by the school population.

Compliance with federal language access policy, however, is just the first of many steps towards inclusion of emergent bilingual families. As such, it should be considered an important departure point, the first level of support, for ensuring that all parents and school staff, regardless of language, have the resources and structures they need to effectively communicate with each other. Systems must go further to establish conditions where everyone has an equal chance and equal footing to be successful and informed. Are services effectively serving the language rights and needs of those they are intended to serve? Are translated documents and interpreters at meetings enough? Are the interpreters who help educators communicate with families, fully bilingual and prepared to face the complex terminology that characterizes the special education process? These are some of the questions that educational systems must ask to determine how to move from providing language access, to fostering equal footing for emergent bilingual families and students.

Little is known about the impact of language access services and the ways in which they may or may not be meeting emergent bilingual families' rights and needs. Even less information has surfaced about the impact of untrained interpreters, and the effects of interpreter bias on the ability and willingness of emergent families to collaborate and exhibit self-advocacy behaviors to support their children. Both emergent bilingual families and school personnel may not be getting accurate information if interpreters lack knowledge of specialized vocabulary, and awareness of language and cultural cues that are important in special education processes. Poor communication may provide school personnel with an inaccurate picture of a child's strengths and areas of improvement and may obscure the cultural wealth that the family brings to their children's education.

Attempting to fulfill the federal language access requirements without a quality assurance process, without measuring impact on family collaboration and engagement, and without an attempt to move towards language justice is

a form of linguicism. Linguicism is described as "ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, regulate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language" (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2015, p. 56). When conversations about language access and language justice don't include topics that explore the ways in which language-based privilege (of English speakers) can manifest itself in ways that have the power to exclude and marginalize legally protected classes of persons, we ignore the obvious.

We remain stuck in the language access level, when schools feel that their responsibility to encourage family engagement in the special education process ends when they provide an interpreter. A school interpreter is oftentimes a bilingual staff member who has been pulled away from their regular duties, with no additional compensation, and who has self-trained on the complexities of the special education terminology and processes. This broken language access system fosters resentment toward emergent bilingual families who are often seen as ungrateful and uninterested in their children's education.

Moving from language access to the language justice level would allow for emergent bilingual families to be seen as collaborators, as holders of key knowledge about their students and truly, as their children's first teachers. Language justice "affirms the fundamental rights of individuals and communities to language, culture, self-expression, and equal participation" (Banerjee & Guiberson, 2012, p. 34). When we think of language justice, we imagine a space where every voice is heard and no language dominates; where language transforms and is no longer seen as a "barrier" or as a "limitation."

This issue of language access and language justice in K-12 settings, especially as it relates to families of children with disabilities is close to my social justice advocate heart. As an emergent bilingual, I faced institutional, cultural and linguistic barriers that almost convinced me I couldn't succeed. As a student labeled "at-risk," and my language skills defined as "limited," I was on track to becoming another negative statistic. However, I found my voice as I

began to train interpreters in K-12 settings. I met bilingual professionals eager to get better at their craft of interpreting and who would often pay for my courses on their own as they received no support for professional development from their schools. They came worried, afraid, concerned that they were not prepared for the terminology they faced each day, or the responsibilities of explaining the special education referral, assessment and eligibility process to emergent bilingual families who had never heard of special education before, but just needed help for their children. Bilingual school staff members and independent contract interpreters kept attending my courses and I started noticing patterns of frustration.

As an instructor, I was asking my students to abide by a code of ethics, to be accurate, to refrain from overstepping their boundaries, to be culturally aware. Yet, even when their interpretation was flawless, emergent bilingual families still left with questions, doubts, and fears for their children's future. Families complied with meeting notices, signed consent forms and permissions for evaluations, all of which were explained by trained interpreters. However, some families still left powerless, helpless, and even more intimidated by the process, even when it was explained in their own language. We were stuck in the language access level once again.

One of the reasons I decided to pursue my PhD in Special Education and start a nonprofit (https://naetisl.org/) to establish national standards and a certification process for interpreters and translators, was precisely to move us, as a community, from the language access level to the justice level and beyond. I seek to research, to understand, to expose conscious or unconscious bias directed toward those whose language is not the standard, but who are equally hungry for information to support their children with disabilities as they navigate through a complex special education system.

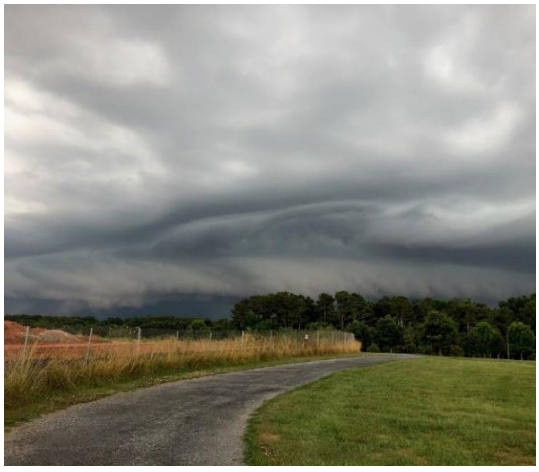
As I thought of the steps to move us from language access to language justice and meaningful collaboration, I discovered the distinguished multiculturalist, Sonia Nieto, who created a model of multicultural support to assess teachers' shifts towards diverse learners. The model focuses on K-12 systems and it felt natural to adapt it to the journey of advocating for equal footing and language justice (Nieto, 2017). This photovoice project seeks to

illustrate this complex journey toward tolerance, respect, and inclusivity for all emergent families.

Level 1 – Monoculturalism

At this level, emergent bilingual families are asked to bring their own interpreter to a special education meeting and accept the parent involvement assumptions of the institution. Even though federal legislation requires schools to provide language access, parents may not ask for these services and meetings are scheduled without asking the family for their language of preference. Emergent bilingual families may feel comfortable communicating in English in a social setting or during a brief conversation with a teacher. However, in a special education setting, they may prefer to have an interpreter as the terminology is complex, meetings are highly emotional and the legal and educational jargon are abundant. To avoid going through the special education process alone, families may rely on family members or their own children to navigate special education meetings which can have major implications on a child's academic future.

A Perfect Storm



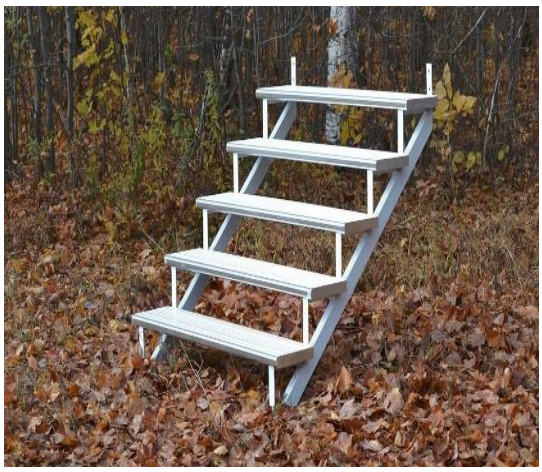
A perfect storm approaches as I take my morning walk. This photo makes me think of the cultural and linguistic misunderstandings that brew when a qualified and trained interpreter is not called upon to support an emergent bilingual family during the special education process. A lonely path leading nowhere, with no support in sight, yet parents must move forward.

Level 2 – Tolerance

Differences "are endured but not necessarily embraced" (Nieto, 2017, p.21). An emergent bilingual family may be encouraged to learn English, adapt to the

dominant culture and be expected to understand the complex special education process which differs vastly from services offered to students with special needs in other countries. Language access in the form of a few translated forms or a phone interpretation service may be provided sporadically.

A Ladder to Nowhere



This self-standing ladder reminded me of the type of language access that emergent bilingual families may be provided during a special education meeting. Language differences are endured but not embraced and lead to an empty space where emergent bilingual families often fall, retrieve and disengage. Academic decisions are then left in the hands of well-meaning educators, but without full knowledge or informed consent of emergent bilingual families.

At this level, emergent bilingual families are still expected and encouraged to ask questions during the assessment, eligibility, and special education program development for their child. This is despite all the information being provided in English and often written in a reading level beyond the recommended 3rd-4th grade level. The fact that it is unacceptable in some cultures to ask questions of authority figures, such as teachers (as it is perceived as "questioning" them), is lost in the process.

The conscious or unconscious bias that characterizes linguicism is also reflected at this level when directed toward speakers whose primary dialects or language are not aligned with Standard American English. Recently, I was conducting a training with school counselors when one said, "I try to communicate with English learner families with the English they have but their accent is so hard to understand!" The irony is that the counselor said this with a heavy Southern accent. Differences are not embraced in this level as we are reminded of the racially coded attitudes that determine the "right" or "wrong" way to speak. Many emergent bilingual families rather not use their English skills and prefer to sit in the shadows as their contributions are ignored.

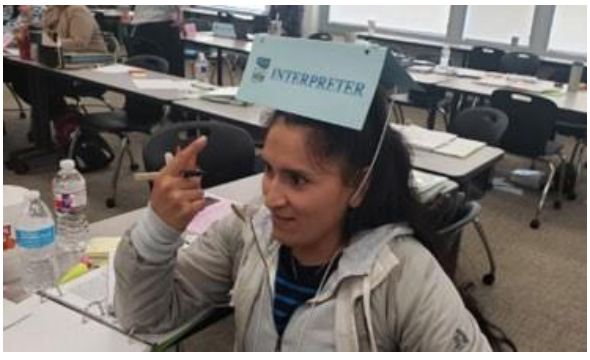
Walking Alone but Still Walking

My Mother during her early morning walks made me think of how lonely our emergent bilingual families must feel when they are not able to communicate the strengths of their children, the family storytelling traditions that make their children smile, even though at school, the children may be "below reading levels," and the long path that is in front of every parent as they seek the best services for their children. Regardless of the obstacles, of the loneliness, of the fear, our parents are still walking, they still show up at meetings, they are resilient.

Level 3 - Acceptance

Linguistic "differences are acknowledged and their importance is neither denied or belittled" (Nieto, 2017, p.23). Special education meetings are scheduled in advance so that teachers can find a bilingual staff member to assist with interpretation or can identify the appropriate process to contract with a language services agency to provide an interpreter. The family is able to get information they need about their child's progress in the language they feel most comfortable. In the case of a bilingual child who needs to be evaluated for special education services, per federal law, the school connected with a trained bilingual staff member or contract interpreter to make sure that the child is evaluated in their home language.

Interpreter to the Rescue



A bilingual teacher attending one of my interpreter trainings depicts how proud she is of using her "bilingual superpowers" to support her community and of her school for investing in the training of bilingual personnel whose job is also to interpret.

Checking the Language Access Box

For the composite score, ,a earned a ABIQ SS of 79, with 95% confidence of her true score falling between 73 and 89. This score is at the 8th percentile, suggesting ABIQ is comparable or better than 8% of her same age peers. This is in the borderline impaired range. However, a review of her Routing subtest scores suggests a difference between her Nonverbal Fluid Reasoning (FR): Object Series/Matrices subtest performance (SS = 8), which was in the average range, and her Verbal Knowledge (KN): Vocabulary performance (SS = 5), which was borderline impaired. had no difficulty identifying patterns among simple objects, and choosing an answer in a multiple choice format. This suggests fairly good novel problem solving skills, and deductive/inductive reasoning skills, especially when a multiple choice response is offered. In contrast struggles with orally defining vocabulary words. There were long delays before she responded, and then she said few words. The sentences she constructed had many grammatical errors. Her reluctance to respond was clear, as it was a struggle for her to begin speaking, with delays up to one minute before she began responding. This interfered with her potential in this area. For example, when asked to define eyelashes, did not respond. Finally, she said "on you eye." During testing of the limits the examiner said, "Do you know where your eyelashes are?" ¡a pointed to them without hesitation, even though she did not get credit for the item. This suggests considerable difficulty with expressive language, and likely word retrieval/use and language formulation.

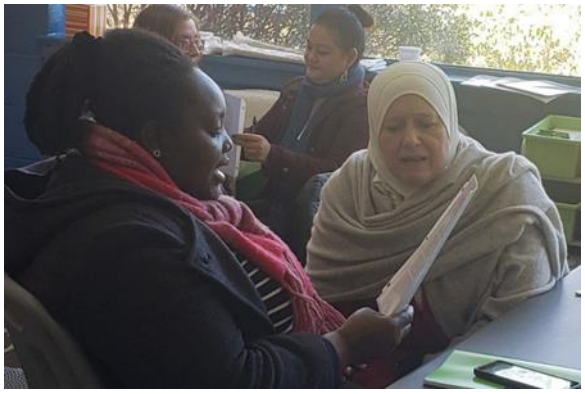
This is a screenshot of a special education document that I was asked to translate for an emergent bilingual family. This had been the family's first meeting where the school psychologist explained the results of the psychoeducational evaluations that were conducted and the eligibility category under which the child qualified for special education services. A Spanish interpreter was present to explain this information and school personnel felt it would also be best to translate the 35- page report to Spanish so the family could review the information at home. Finding a Spanish equivalent for this type of terminology, while being accurate per my Code of Ethics as a translator, took hours of effort. Our educational systems are different; our tools to evaluate children are different. Besides English, the child speaks another language at home. Per IDEA requirements, the child should have been evaluated in all the languages spoken and there was no evidence of this in the report. Is this possibly the reason that the school psychologist writes "This suggests considerable difficulty with expressive language and likely word retrieval/use of language formulation"? How different would this phrase be if the child had been evaluated in all the languages spoken at home?

Lastly, as I finished this lengthy report, I felt deflated. The family speaks an Indigenous Mayan language at home, not Spanish. Yet, a Spanish interpreter was provided, per language access policies and laws, and a Spanish translation was offered. The language access box was checked. However, the family's identity, preference and voice were still not heard through this process and with a Spanish interpreter and a document written in high register Spanish, I can only imagine all of the questions and concerns this family must have about their child. We are stuck in Level 3.

Level 4 - Respect

Both special education personnel and emergent bilingual families respect and regard each other's cultures and languages. One language does not dominate the other and the cultural wealth that emergent bilingual families bring to the special education table is valued and integrated into the individualized education plan of the student. Emergent bilingual families are given opportunities to ask questions, to question, to contribute as equal members of the educational team. Bilingual school staff members who support educators and families with interpretation, and independent contract interpreters, are provided with rigorous and standardized training to face the complex special education terminology. They are provided with glossaries, case studies, ethical dilemmas, and tools to be as prepared as they can to support both, schools and families through this complicated and emotional process.

In Plain Language

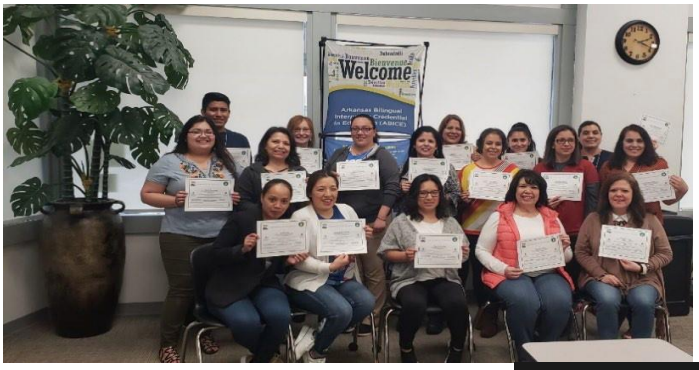


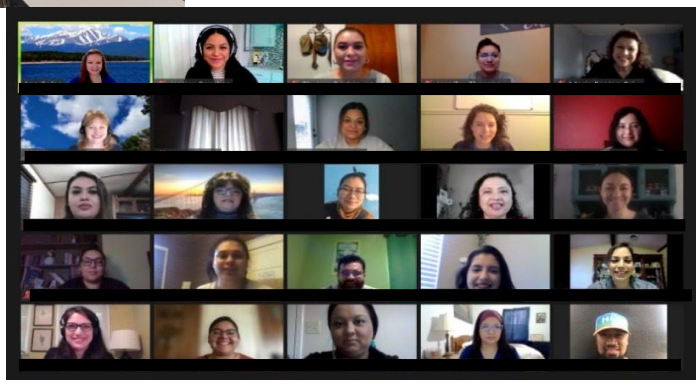
This is a photograph I took of the last in-person training I did (pre-COVID) where I asked teachers to review some of the documents they sent to emergent bilingual families and identify ways to turn them into parent-oriented resources. In this picture, both teachers were commenting on the large number of abbreviations used (noticing that the author never spelled them out anywhere else in the document), educational jargon, and phrases that emphasized deficits as opposed to strengths. Through this activity, terms such as "limited knowledge," "at-risk," "borderline impaired," and "poor performance," were replaced by asset-based and strength-focused language. Understanding the effects of these labels and the difficulty translating some of these terms created an opportunity for dialogue about respect, cultural wealth, true collaboration and equal footing opportunities for all families.

Striving for Perfection

Bilingual school personnel continue to seek professional development opportunities to grow their skills as interpreters. Oftentimes, these dedicated professionals pay for their

own continuing education and take personal time off to attend skill-building session, learn ways to increase their vocabulary, and guide school personnel on ways to effectively collaborate with an interpreter. They learn new technology, new strategies, new ways to advocate for themselves as professionals and to empower families in their schools.





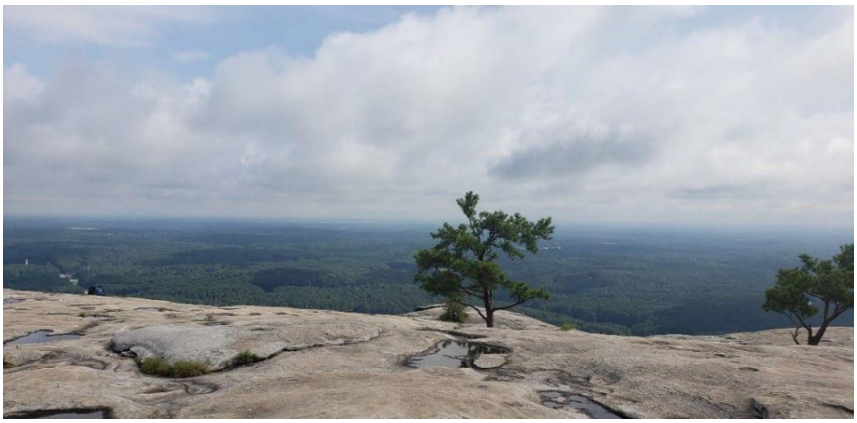
Level 5 - Affirmation and Critique

Conflict is recognized as a natural process. Emergent bilingual families, school personnel and interpreters work together to change assumptions, to critique language access plans, to truly collaborate in the development of an individualized special education program for children who need additional support. The cultural wealth of emergent bilingual families is valued and incorporated in educational plans and support systems for children with disabilities.

Cultural traditions such as storytelling, are incorporated as part of the essential tools that can help a child thrive at home and at school. Multilingual communication is no longer viewed as a form of ancillary support that is only needed when required by law, but rather as an asset and strength. An

evaluation process is established to annually assess the operations and effectiveness of language assistance services and its effects on emergent family collaboration and student achievement. A group of stakeholders, led by emergent bilingual families and including personnel across the organizational structure and operations, is organized to add value to the current methods used to identify issues and assess the quality and impact of the services provided to parents.

Exposed but Not Defeated



An image from the top of Stone Mountain, GA reminds me of the resilience of our emergent bilingual families who have children with disabilities. I am always amazed at the way trees and plants find their way to grow in one of the largest granite formations in the eastern U.S. After much heat and friction, the shifting of the earth's crust beneath the surface created this rock that slowly hardened into granite. Life on this granite environment can be very stressful because of exposure to the elements (rain, wind, sun, etc.) Few species can grow on the rock and many stages of plant growth have to take place before a plant community is established on top of the rock.

Life as an emergent bilingual parent of a child with a disability having to navigate the U.S. educational system can also be very stressful. Our families are constantly exposed to the elements of conscious or unconscious bias, systemic barriers, and cultural or linguistic identity loss. Yet, as the tree in this photograph, after many stages, our parents thrive, adapt, and grow to establish communities and become advocates for others parents who are new to the special education process. Empowered parents may be lonely at the top, but they continue fomenting the transition from language access to language justice and the importance of interpreters, families and school personnel working together.

The Best for Last

I couldn't have reached Level 5 in my own journey as an emergent bilingual advocate without my Mother. Here she is reading my acceptance letter to the PhD program at the University of Georgia. She has lived all her life to right the wrongs, to support those whose voices were not heard. It is because of her that I am at the level of affirmation and critique where I can work on identifying systemic changes and discovering solutions.

Ending Thoughts

This photovoice project has allowed me to explore the personal and professional reasons behind the work that I do to advocate for full and meaningful collaboration with emergent bilingual families. Seeing this journey through photographs that depict special moments or people in my life, help me visualize where to go next and determine the additional support systems that need to be in place for me to continue to advocate for our families, our schools, our interpreters and our communities. The energy and time invested in the growth of our national organization seems worth it when I look back and remember where my journey started and where I am now.

Just as important as the voices of emergent bilingual families, are the voices of educators who rely on interpreters for communication, and those are the voices that are missing from my analysis. Educators also want the best for their students and are also at the mercy of bilingual professionals who may be willing to assist, but not fully prepared to communicate accurately. Their voices as well as the voices of interpreters must continue to be highlighted in this process.

Promoting more linguistically inclusive school settings for multilingual parent populations is a journey. Clearly written language access policy is an

appropriate departure point for promoting greater engagement of persons from linguistically minoritized communities. Language justice or "equal footing," should not be measured by what schools offer or make available to emergent bilingual families, but rather measured in the way language assistance services enhance family engagement in situations where school communications and interactions cross lines of cultural and language difference, such as special education.

The rights of parents in public education are inextricably linked to the rights of their minor children. If we have a genuine interest in providing a free and appropriate education for all students, then our commitment should also extend to meaningfully including all families as a critical part of their support base. Language access policies and practices must be centered in inclusive schooling practices and promoted as an integral piece to preserving the rights all families have to accessing the full benefits of U.S. public education.

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Ana Soler is the Chairperson of the National Association of Educational Translators and Interpreters of Spoken Languages (NAETISL.org) and Founder of SeSo, Inc., (sesoincga.org) a source of qualified and trained interpreters and translators in education. She completed her degree in Social Work at Georgia State University, her Master's Degree in Public Health at Emory University, and is close to obtaining her Ph.D. in Special Education at the University of Georgia. For over a decade, Ana worked with the largest school district in Georgia as the Language Services and Parent Outreach Coordinator, developing, implementing and evaluating professional development opportunities for multilingual personnel, as well as discovering endless opportunities to engage multilingual families in their children's education. She has authored interpreter training curricula nationally including the Intercultural Parent and Youth Leadership Program, the Interpretation Academy for Bilingual High School Students, the Arkansas Interpreter in Education Credential Training, and a 40-hour course for medical interpreters. She has been an Adjunct Instructor at the University of Georgia for 11 years teaching three online courses she authored including the Professional Interpreter in Education Certificate course, the Professional Interpreter in Special Education Certificate course, and the Professional Translator in Education Certificate course. As part of her doctoral studies, Ana and a team of Subject Matter Experts are developing a national certification pilot test for spoken language interpreters in education.