

LEP, ESL, ELL, EL, or Multilingual? Resisting the deficit model

Srividya Natarajan

As globalization brought about increased flow of persons, knowhow, and goods between nations, universities responded by applying their resources to internationalization. In 2019, there were 435,415 post-secondary international students in Canada (Payne, 2019). Though users of English as a second or third language have been successfully completing their studies in Canadian universities for many decades, many professionals who teach international students still view them as a problem rather than as an asset (Gaulee, 2018). This attitude emerges in the way students are labelled or identified in the classroom.

While Canada has not labelled students “limited English proficient” (LEP) as the U.S. has (Martínez, 2018), some of the same negative ideas attached to the “LEP” identity have been attached to “English Language Learners” (ELLs, sometimes shortened to “English Learner” or EL) or “English as a Second Language” (ESL) students. As Li (2018) notes, the “pull-out” programs in Canadian high schools, where ESL students were given extra coaching in English writing and reading skills by specialist teachers, were disliked by the parents of these students because of the stigma of the label, which ended up isolating ESL students from their Canadian classmates. Such labels, along with their accompanying educational remedies, have been unsuccessful for many reasons. One reason, the focus of this paper, is that both the labels and the corrective measures are based on the idea that ESL students somehow *lack* something native English speakers have. As Martínez notes, “[w]e focus on what they *cannot* do (vs. what they *can* do)” (2018, p. 516). This paper argues that resisting the “deficit model” approach to users of English as an academic language will not only change the attitudes of instructors in such a way as to result in a positive environment for learning, but it will also psychologically support the students as they handle the stress of trying to succeed academically while using an unfamiliar language.

Instead of the label “ESL,” which implies lack of skills in English, many educators today use the term “multilingual,” stressing the idea that these students have rich knowledge and skills in their own language and cultural worlds. From the point of view of teachers, changing how they label their students can make them conscious that far from lacking skills and knowledge, the students can, in fact, read, write, and function in more than one language. As Martínez remarks, when teachers assume deficiency in ELLs, “we do not ... invite them [non-native users of English] to do what readers and writers do, we do not look for their brilliance, we do not name their strengths, and we do not encourage them to draw on their full linguistic repertoires”

(2018, p. 516). Acknowledging the *abilities* and *strengths* that multilingual students bring can transform teaching and make it more effective.

From the point of view of the students, being labelled in a way that underlines their *ability* can increase their confidence. Tracking a program in a British Columbia high school that drew on students' knowledge of their own first language and culture, encouraged them to give their opinions, helped them make friends across the cultural divide, and valued them as highly intelligent, Li (2018) remarks that many of the students in the program went on to take Advanced Placement courses, which they would have never considered before. The program's success, Li (2018) asserts, arose from the fact that the students enjoyed it, that the teacher was willing to be a "change agent" and that the school was willing to back him up.

The number of students who use more than one language, and who use English as an academic language in Canada, will only grow, as factors like immigration and internationalization of universities bring greater diversity into our classrooms. At a moment like this, we cannot be content with asking, as Juliet did in Shakespeare's play, "What's in a name?" Labels can be either empowering or disempowering, and resisting the deficit approach to international and immigrant students could begin with the use of a label that celebrates their abilities and intelligence.

References

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