

Speak American: Be multilingual

By Mary Amanda Stewart 5 p.m. Feb. 12, 2014

As I walk into the school cafeteria, it's easy to spot the table where my son's class is seated. They're the bilingual class.

All of the students are Latino first-graders who speak Spanish at home. All but one. My white, native English-speaking son.

I hear them discuss superheroes in Spanish. His friends are his greatest language teachers, which is hard to admit, considering I have a bachelor's degree in Spanish, master's in education, and doctorate in literacy. I have taught more than 1,200 students from age 8 to 80 over the last 13 years.

However, as evident in the backlash from the Coke commercial that aired during the Super Bowl, some people are uncomfortable with bi- or multilingualism. They want us to #speakAmerican. Well, in that case, we should speak the languages in the commercial which inhabited this land before the English: Keres and Spanish.

Multilingualism is un-American, right?

As I professor of bilingual education, I often ask my students: Is it good or bad to be multilingual? They consistently answer that it is very good. And research supports their answers.

Many studies show there are cognitive benefits from being bilingual. Bilingualism increases the executive function of the brain, responsible for planning and problem-solving. Yes, the 4-year-old translating for her parents at the pharmacy has connections in her brain that a monolingual does not and is providing an essential service to our society.

In many fields, if you speak more than one language, you make more money. A bilingual teacher in North Texas can make up to \$4,000 more a year for working the same amount as a monolingual teacher. The same teacher also has more job opportunities and security.

Recently, studies are showing that bilinguals develop Alzheimer's or dementia five years later than people who only speak one language. If any of you, like me, has seen a loved one suffer from severe memory loss, you know how priceless five more years could be.

Who would not want their children to be smarter, have more opportunities, and be in their right mind years longer?

But we are ignoring the untapped resource of our indigenous and immigrant communities. In 2012, there were more than 4.5 million students in U.S. schools learning English as a second language, not even accounting for the fully bilingual students. The census predicts that by 2030, around 40 percent of school-age children will have an immigrant parent.

Many people read this with fear. How will we teach all of them English? Actually, youth are losing their home languages quickly in schools that symbolically privilege monolingualism. Immigrant families usually lose their language by the third generation. But how can we afford bilingual programs? Perhaps the question is: How can we afford not to?

Linguistic incompetence costs money. The United Kingdom claims their lack of multilingualism is costing them 48 billion pounds per year. U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, has stated: “The United States is a long way from being the multilingual society that so many of our economic competitors are.”

I see the wonderful potential bilingual youth offer us to develop a linguistically competent society.

Still, many people are uncomfortable hearing patriotic songs in multiple languages. To them it feels like losing a country. A country that punished generations of children for speaking their home languages in school.

I understand they feel threatened. If we really think it is better to be bilingual, then monolingual English-speakers lose power — power that has been inherent for generations.

An alternative is to see the beauty of multilingualism. Or we could just want to improve the economy.

Either way, individuals that enrich our country with their languages are certainly a resource for all of us, like my son. In fact, they are perhaps essential to America’s future success in a global economy.

So, I raise my glass of Diet Cherry Coke to the immigrants and people who speak native languages in the United States. Thank you for enriching my life and giving my child what I could never do just on my own. #AmericasBeautiful.

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