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What Counselors Need to Know about Language and Language Acquisition to Enhance Their Effectiveness with Clients

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It will be helpful to begin by defining terms that will be used throughout this document.

Monolingual English Speakers (MES): Those clients whose only language is English. They may or may not have had some contact with other languages, for example, meeting educational requirements. MES do not carry on conversations, read, or write a language other than English. They may feel uncomfortable in a setting where English is not being spoken.

Novice Bilingual Speakers (NBS): Those clients whose language of the home, workplace, places of worship and recreation is English. They feel happily challenged or comfortable negotiating a social event or place where the language is not English. NBS cannot carry on a conversation or read or write comfortably in a second language. They are comfortable *listening with the heart* when they cannot *listen with the head*.

Listening with the heart means listening graciously when the conversation is not English. The listener depends upon non-verbal and non-vocal cues for some understanding of what is transpiring.

Listening with the head means understanding the content and underlying messages of conversation.

English Language Learners (ELL): Those clients whose first language is not English. They may or may not be immigrants to the United States. The language of the home, prayer, feeling, and counting is their first language. Their English abilities involve survival skills rather than academics (Cummins, 1981). ELL may be able to communicate conversationally in English, but their language of the heart is their first language. They likely have difficulty communicating their feelings in English.

Bilinguals or Bilingual Speakers (BLS): Those clients who are proficient in two languages. Some may have learned the second language after *primary language development*. Many may be comfortable sharing feelings in their second language, but some may feel more comfortable sharing feelings in their first language.

Primary language development takes place approximately before the age of seven when language can be acquired and learned easily. Older people tend to struggle when they are introduced to a new language. After primary language learning time, it takes approximately seven years of concentration and experience to master academic second language over survival language skills (Cummins, 1996).

Acquired language meets the social or survival needs. For example, individuals ask for basic directions, communicate in short phrases, and use simplified communication skills. *Acquired language* takes place informally. Formal language typically requires the study of grammar, syntax and other structural elements (Ovando and Collier, 1985).

Balanced Bilingual Speakers (BBS): Those clients who have been raised from conception with two languages. Usually they are born into a

bilingual family where each parent speaks to them in his or her first language. They grow up not ever knowing a time when they could not communicate in two languages. Their abilities to speak, write, and read in both languages are developed from the beginning. These clients will commonly engage in code-switching with other similar bilinguals (Baker, 2003; Myers-Scotton, 1996; Miesel, 2007).

Code-switching is moving from one language to another in the same conversation transferring the elements and/or rules of language without pausing to translate thoughts or ideas. The flow of language continues without interruptions (Baker, 2003; Myers-Scotton, 1996; Miesel, 2007).

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The following are examples of *acquired language*. Children have conversations with caregivers, other children, and imaginary friends. They can be seen role playing or acting out situations. Words are associated with objects. Gestures are often used in an effort to communicate. On the other hand, *language learning* is mostly seen in formal settings, for example, schools, colleges, and universities. Learning a language requires study of vocabulary, syntax, grammar, lexicon and other structural elements.

There is a sequential development to the learning of language. MES, NBS, ELL, BLS, and BBS develop language in the same sequence (de Houwer, 1995). Vocabulary and syntax become more and more complex: First one word, then phrases, then sentences, then paragraphs. Finally, language progresses to full interaction, and communication is comprehensible and understandable.

Clients who have learned two languages during primary language development, for example, Spanish and English, will have few struggles when communicating with MES counselors. Those who learned one language, for example, Spanish, during primary language development and a second language, for example, English, later in life may have many struggles expressing themselves especially when communicating emotionally laden content.

In addition, if clients are proficient in their first language, they will find it less challenging to become functional in a second language. Clients who do not have a formal knowledge of their first language, will find it very difficult, if not impossible, to learn to function in a second language. This explains the conundrum of the following example.

MES counselors can be curious about the reasons as to why it is so difficult to communicate with clients who have been sent to them from the courts or Children's Protective Services. They may notice that adults in the family have been in the United States for some time and are still not proficient in English.

Counselors will be effective if they understand how ELL and BLS clients develop and learn language. ELL and BLS clients acquired and learned their first and second languages in many different settings, for example, at home, in the neighborhood, at day-care, in their places of worship, in school, on television, and at social events in the wider community (Volterra & Taeschner, 2007). ELL and BLS clients have learned to communicate in familiar settings. They may sound knowledgeable about speaking English but do not have the proficiency in English to communicate in the unfamiliar setting of the counseling site. Social or survival language is the language needed to function at a basic level (Cummins, 1996). ELL and BLS clients may find it very difficult to find the words to express their feelings, especially, their multifaceted, profound emotions. The reason for this may be that their academic language or ability to manipulate English is not well enough developed.

Language includes embracing and communicating culture in general and emotional culture in particular. Views of the world, values, concepts of time, relational traditions, understanding of the transcendent, and customs are embedded in language. Mothers read, laugh, talk and sing to their children in the womb. Research has supporting data that children in the womb, not only hear sounds, but begin to recognize them (de Houwer, 1995). A few hours after birth, babies recognize their mother's voice. Their cooing, babbling, and interacting with caregivers begins postnatal primary language development (de Houwer, 1995).

MES counselors may not have ever been expected to communicate in a language other than English. Such counselors may not have had the opportunity to be part of a group where a language other than English is the language of communication. Consequently, MES counselors can miss content and important underlying messages in their conversations with ELL and BLS clients.

Counselors often hear conversational English spoken by clients and, accordingly, assume that these clients are able to engage in the counseling relationship with them. Such counselors are not aware that clients for whom English is their second language may neither have the skills nor ability in English to engage in the conversations required for counseling to be helpful. Therefore, counselors might miss the significance in the clients' stories, especially, when those stories are laden with emotion. Counselors may not understand the hesitancy of ELL and BLS clients, and may even judge them as resistant. In reality, these ELL and BLS clients may be unable to communicate emotion in their second language and prefer to be silent instead of embarrass themselves.

When ELL and BLS clients are struggling to find the words to tell their stories and, especially, to share their feelings, such as grief, sadness, alienation, loneliness, fear, or rejection, they can become anxious. ELL and BLS clients may even feel shame. Consequently, instead of the session's bringing relief, it results in greater pain.

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In order for counselors to become competent in working with language diverse clients, it is helpful to know the difference between **first language development/acquisition** and **bilingual development/acquisition**. The former is the acquiring of only one language during primary language development, and the latter refers to simultaneous acquisition of more than one language during primary language development (Genesee, 2007). These differences can confuse counselors who are not familiar with the distinction.

ELL clients are first language acquisition clients. They are in the process of learning a second language after they have learned their first language. The second language is learned after primary language development. BBS clients are bilingual development/acquisition clients. They have learned two or more languages at the same time (Harley et al., 1990).

MES counselors may have clients who can express their feelings comfortably because they are in fact BBS. When MES counselors have other clients who learned English after their primary language development, these ELL or BLS clients may not be able to express their feelings in English. ELL or BLS clients may not be able to describe deep emotions for which they came to counseling to resolve. Counselors, who are not familiar with the distinction between first language development/acquisition and bilingual development/acquisition, may wonder what the explanation is for their being successful with the former and not with the latter.

Given the array of levels of skills in the ability of ELL and BLS clients to communicate with MES counselors, a comparison might help. *Input* of language refers to what clients can understand from the language being spoken (Krashen, 1985). If the language is unintelligible and incomprehensible, language output will not occur. For example, ELL or BLS clients may not be able to understand or make inferences about what they hear MES counselors saying. Consequently, ELL or BLS clients may feel confused, conflicted, or embarrassed. They may conclude that counseling is a waste of time.

An example of language input for bilingual development/acquisition clients could include a home where a father always has spoken to his children in English, and a mother has always spoken to her children in Spanish. For these children, their experiences of two languages have been since conception. These bilingual development/acquisition clients may be able to tell their stories and express their feelings in English to an MES counselor.

Bilingual development/acquisition results in BBS clients. They develop language in the same manner as first language development/acquisition clients, but the counseling issues are very different (de Houwer, 1995). By the age of two, children are able to separate the two distinct languages. Very young bilingual development/acquisition children may show surprise when they hear others speaking “Mother talk” or “Father talk”. Although input is

intelligible by age two, it might take longer for output to be established. It may take BBS children longer to begin to speak words, phrases, and sentences in the two languages.

This information can be a starting point for counselors who work with ELL and BLS children and adults. School counselors can help administrators and teachers work with ELL and BLS children. Counselors in agencies or private practice can observe the level of language development of ELL and BLS children and adult clients and interact accordingly.

The best educational environment for ELL and BLS children is in dual language schools where they can continue to develop both languages simultaneously (Thomas & Collier, 1997). Children who are learning a second language need continued development of their first language if they will become proficient speakers, readers, and writers in English. In order for school counselors to carry out their mandate to develop the social and emotional lives of students for the purpose of their academic success, counselors in these schools must be grounded in understanding language development and its influence on learning.

Bilingual clients may exhibit more complex linguistic skills and abilities than monolingual clients because their ideas are neither lost nor incorrectly put into words (Baker, 2003). Code-switching, the moving from one language to another in conversation, is common for many BBS. Research has provided evidence to support the hypothesis that clients who code-switch exhibit higher forms of linguistic development than those who do not (Myers-Scotton, 1996).

BLS clients may have conversational ability in English but are not able to understand counselors who speak English in unfamiliar ways. It is as if clients were taken from their home where the language is familiar and comfortable and put into another home where the same language is spoken in a way that is unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Counseling will not be helpful unless strategies to address these impasses are put into play.

BBS or BLS clients may code switch in a counseling session. Their motive might be to express themselves more clearly. They may insert a word or phrase that expresses what they are thinking or feeling. BBS or BLS clients are making an effort to share their inner experiences. BBS or BLS clients will use the language that best allows them to express themselves in what they are trying to communicate.

The social and linguistic behavior of BBS or BLS children may differ from adults. As with monolingual youth, they create their own words and phrases. Hence, they may feel more comfortable with social and linguistic behavior different from the counselor. It is imperative that counselors develop flexibility toward children's communication when their youthful clients code switch in unique ways.

Research has shown that BBS and BLS children who code switch exhibit high forms of linguistic skills and abilities because their ideas and sentence structures are well

developed and correctly used (Myers-Scotton, 1996). The flow continues from one language to the other. The flow of thoughts is sustained, and grammar is correct. Only the language itself changes. Genesee (2007) wrote that virtually all BBS and BLS children mix elements from their two languages. This is found, especially, at the early levels of language development.

Of special importance for counselors to know is that BBS and BLS clients associate one of their languages with certain people, events, activities, situations, animals, toys and so forth. For example, if BBS or BLS men learned to play cribbage in French, they will continue to play cribbage in French. If a BBS or BLS child's great grandmother, who speaks only French, gives her a doll for her birthday, and the conversation between them is in French, this child may give her doll a French name and always speak to her doll in French. Counselors understand their clients may communicate in the language spoken when the events were first experienced.

Finally, the development of language cannot be separated from culture. Many clients exhibit strong cultural and linguistic ties. Their language and culture are one. When the cultural language is not available to them in counseling, clients can feel devalued. Clients can feel alienated and may resist counseling if their presence is mandated or never come back if their counseling is voluntary. Even BLS clients may have a dominant language in which they prefer to speak. Consequently, counselors, even MES counselors, find ways to provide opportunities for ELL, BLS, and BBS clients to use their language of the heart.

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