



ESOL: English for Speakers of Other Languages

Creating cultural competence, compassion, and connections one flutter at a time.

The Conversation

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The Identity of Language

Language, the words we use and the way we use them, reveals how we perceive the world by how we speak about the world. Vice versa, our language effects how the world perceives us.

Question:

What if the world sees a child differently than how the child sees herself or himself?

Most of us know someone who has adopted a child from another country. Depending on the age at the time of adoption, the child grows up with a self-identity largely dependent upon the language of the adopting parents. If the parents are English-speaking, white parents, then not a thought is given to whether a pre-school child is an English speaker or not.

More questions:

Does the language that a child speaks reflect the way we see that child?

Does the language that the parents speak reflect the way we see that child?

Or does the child's appearance have a greater effect? What about how the parent looks?

And is our perception the same as the child's perception?

The reality of our society, even in the remotest nooks of our country, is that checking boxes on forms and documents is becoming more and more arbitrary and less relevant. Language, race, ethnicity, birthplace, gender can be complicated and nonconforming when it comes to someone's self-identity or even how others perceive a person.

More questions:

What if the adoptive parents are not white? Not born in the U.S.? Do other thoughts enter when it comes to self-identity and external identity?

What if one or both adoptive parents are biracial, bilingual, bi-ethnic? What if one parent is US-born, speaks English, and the other isn't and doesn't?

What if the adoptive parent is also a foreign-born adoptee – adopted by white English-speaking parents and self-identifies as monolingual English?

Do these variations change anything for the self and external identity of the child?



Lia (left) and Mariyah (right) share their stories of adoption, identity, and language.

Meet Lia:

Born Diana Gomez Benitez in Bogota, Colombia, Lia was adopted by a family in Maine. Her parents, a military couple from New York and Virginia who made their permanent home in

Rangeley, ME, adopted Lia as a baby through Tierra de Hombres. The nonprofit organization tries to reconnect family members separated by war and violence or find homes for those who have lost their families. At the time, Colombia suffered from brutal drug-cartel violence.

“I grew up [in Maine] and went to school and felt confident and just like all the other kids,” said Lia. “I never experienced racism or even knew what it was while I was going to school. My family did not speak Spanish and didn’t explore it with me. But my parents provided for me and my brother [also adopted] a safe, warm, amazing childhood. On reflection, I feel so grateful that my parents traveled to Colombia to find me and bring me home.”

Home for Lia was small town Maine. Not until her college years did Lia realize what racism was. And not until then did she question her own identity. When her family vacationed in Mexico or Central America, Lia felt uncomfortable. She looked like the locals but did not speak Spanish. It bothered her, and she thought she should learn Spanish. Eventually she let go of the need to speak Spanish and “to be” Spanish, she said.

Meet Mariyah:

Mariyah began life in a Guatemala orphanage. The caretakers in the orphanage spoke Spanish and originally named her Emeli. Lia and her white, US-born husband adopted her as a baby and brought her home to Brunswick, ME after a two-year process. Lia said she knew in her heart that Guatemala was the place, and Mariyah was the one. Mariyah was about the same age as Lia when she became a Mainer. Incorporating names from their own mothers, Lia and her husband named her Mariyah Elizabeth Emeli. Both Lia and her husband knew and spoke only English. Mariyah has grown up knowing and speaking only English.

Then Mariyah experienced learning difficulties, particularly in reading, in her elementary years. She was given English Language Learner (ELL) support services and identified as an English Learner (EL).

Currently, the Maine Department of Education’s English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) division provides specific requirements for identifying students for ESOL services. First the parents fill out the “Language Use Survey.” If English is the only language, then the process ends. If another language is listed, then the student is screened for English proficiency. If the student scores at the state-defined proficiency mark, then the process ends there. A student is identified for ESOL services if the parents list another language, and the student scores below the state benchmark when screened. The process is based on federal law and is incorporated into every school district’s Lau plan.

But at the time, it seemed like an avenue to give

Mariyah additional help, which she still qualifies for because of the equally state-specific program exit criteria.

“I think maybe some decisions were made based on what we looked like and where we came from,” said Lia. “But it gave us a chance to meet other families with other languages that I just didn’t know existed in Brunswick. That was fun.”

As for Mariyah, she said she never thought about her differences. “I just feel like a normal kid,” she said. “When I got older, I realized I was a little different, but on a day to day basis, I really don’t think about it.”

Lia said she has thought a lot about different cultures, mixed cultures, different values, the argument for or against assimilation. She has reached the conclusions that it’s complicated, but the goal is to live peacefully together.

INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTIONS:

- Adoptions from other countries in 2017 numbered 4,714, a decline of 14% from the previous year, mostly due to drops in China and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
- Even though China’s adoptions fell, it still ranked as the top country for adoptions with 1,905. Ten years earlier, the number was 19,942.
- Ethiopia, Haiti, India, South Korea, The Ukraine, The Philippines, and Nigeria ranked among the top countries for U.S. adoptions in 2017.
- Colombia accounted for 181 U.S. adoptions, and Guatemala had one in 2017.
- 2017 marked the first time, adoptions came from Yemen, Zimbabwe, and Laos, as well as six other new countries.
- 21 of the total 2017 adoptions were by Maine parents.
- Adoption fees in 2017 by the country of origin ranged from \$2,300 in Zambia to \$33,295 in Haiti.

The Holocausts of Guatemala

Despite three attempts to wipe out the indigenous people in Guatemala, the Maya still make up about 51% of the country's population.

- The First Holocaust – The Spanish Conquest in the 1500s
- The Second Holocaust – The Liberal Revolution and land reform of the 1800s
- The Third Holocaust (also known as the Silent Holocaust) – The Government killings and forced disappearances in the 1980s and 1990s

In 1954, the US Central Intelligence Agency helped stage a coup and install a dictator regime. Civil war followed between 1960 and 1996. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Guatemalan government carried out a systematic campaign to kill or force “disappearance” of more than 200,000 people. Of those, an estimated 83% were Maya. Between 500,000 to 1.5 million Guatemalans fled the country.



“Language is an anonymous, collective and unconscious art; the result of the creativity of thousands of generations.”

– Edward Sapir,
American anthropologist-linguist (1884-1939)

Notable Mayan Civilization Advancements

- A recorded writing system dating back to 300 BC
- Agricultural methods
- Astronomy and the calendar
- Mathematics and the number zero

Maya Languages

- Today in Mexico and Central America, 5 million people speak nearly 70 Mayan languages, and most are bilingual in Spanish.
- In 1996, a civilian Guatemalan government formally recognized 21 Mayan languages.

By Emily Darby, Brunswick School Department ESOL Coordinator/Teacher

Sources: U.S. Department of State's “Annual Report on Intercountry Adoptions” (2017); Minority Rights Group International; Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics; The Center for Justice and Accountability