

Lengthening the Language Line | From High School to Higher Education: University Global Seal of Biliteracy



SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY



Cristina Alfaro, Ph.D., San Diego State University

Reka Barton, M.A., San Diego State University

Alma Castro, Ed.D., California Association for Bilingual Education

“As a First-Generation Latina college student—Spanish heritage speaker, for the first time in my life—my bilingual and biliteracy skills (Spanish/English) are formally recognized in academia.”
(UGSoB recipient, 2021).

Introduction and Background

The United States has experienced an outpouring in Dual Language (DL) education programs over the last decade, and California’s Proposition 58 has provided school districts increased flexibility in the types of language program models offered in schools. In 1998, California approved Proposition 227, which banned bilingual education and required students to learn English only. After the passage of Proposition 227, grass-roots efforts led by a coalition of civil rights leaders, teachers, and education advocates (Californians Together) resulted in policy change with Assembly Bill 815.

These efforts established the State Seal of Biliteracy (SSB) in California in 2011 (Heineke & Davin, 2020) with the purpose, as documented in the literature, to prepare students with the skills necessary for the twenty-first century. The SSB, designed by language advocates, teachers, administrators, and state policymakers, not only encourages linguistically diverse students to learn English and maintain their home language but also promotes access for English speakers to develop

proficiency in another language. Further, the SSB recognizes an additional language as an asset for the state, nation, and world—and validates biliteracy and bilingualism as an important twenty-first-century skill for the global economy and for universities to recognize and give academic credit (California Department of Education State Seal of Biliteracy webpage). The SSB recognition also aims to elevate multilingualism and provide employers and universities with a method for recognizing and valuing a candidate’s bilingual, bicultural, and biliteracy skills. Furthermore, it promotes the unveiling and celebration of students’ self-identity and linguistic and cultural assets.

Linguistic and Cultural Multicompetence

Affirming and honoring students’ linguistic and cultural diversity is imperative for advancing educational outcomes with a multilingual and global vision while students are encouraged to expand their primary language, develop proficiency in other languages, and draw on their linguistic wealth to make connections to new learning and to a multilingual society.

Language policies in the United States, however, have always been a manifestation of ideologies rather than educational debates (Alfaro, 2018). For example, regardless of whether language policies are assimilationist or pluralist, the ideologies, sociohistorical factors, and sociopolitical context behind education policies determine the educational quality, experiences, access, and opportunities imparted to linguistic minoritized students. These factors ultimately impact language learning in PreK-20 education, which, in turn, shape the self-identity, lives, and futures of students and their families.

As we look towards the future, SSB initiatives and more progressive language policy shifts favoring multilingual education and recognizing student linguistic wealth in higher education are building positive momentum. In 2020-21, for example, 72,593 SSBs were awarded in California. Altogether since its inception, from 2012 to 2021, a total of 404,428 high school seniors earned the SSB in California (CDE State Seal of Biliteracy webpage). This data affirms growth not only in valuing student linguistic capital but also in recognizing the hard work of families, educators, and community members who promote heritage language learning and maintenance (Castro, 2020). The collective wisdom of those who engineered the establishment of language education policy continues to guide us as we extend language learning at the university level.

Currently, the questions that remain are: what can Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) further do to acknowledge and give value to the SSB? And more importantly, what pathways are being created and can be created to continue expanding language learning opportunities for students once they graduate from high school and enter the university?

The University Global Seal of Biliteracy: Lengthening the Language Line

This article documents the journey and critical reflections of one Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) Transborder University while launching a systematic pathway for university students to lengthen their language learning by working towards obtaining a University Global Seal of Biliteracy (UGSoB).

San Diego State University (SDSU) International Affairs, in partnership with the Multilingual California

Project (MCAP), developed and implemented the UGSoB to affirm students' linguistic and cultural assets as outlined in the California English Learner Roadmap (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/rm/>). The guiding vision for the initiative was to enrich language learning opportunities for university students and for them to become what Valdés (2020) coined “linguistically multicompetent.”

San Diego State University's UGSoB is a digital badge that SDSU students can earn through participating in a cultural and linguistic immersion experience and demonstrating working proficiency in the following four domains: reading, writing, listening, and speaking in a language other than English. Proficiency is validated through standardized testing using the ACTFL proficiency scale.

Together, the State Seal of Biliteracy (SSB) and the SDSU UGSoB initiatives incentivize and lengthen language learning through a high level of recognition at both the high school and university levels. For example, in order to value and honor students' linguistic wealth in the CaliBaja region, SDSU launched its inaugural UGSoB in Spanish in spring 2021 to create a process that can be disseminated throughout the California State University (CSU) system, as well as other universities. The first cohort of 14 students received their UGSoB digital badges in May 2021, during the first semester it was offered. (<https://www.sdsu.edu/internationalaffairs/globalseal>). These recipients included seven students from the International Business program and seven from the Fowler College of Business—thirteen of which identified as Latinx. (https://newscenter.sdsu.edu/sdsu_newscenter/news_story.aspx?sid=78368). Subsequently, the SDSU UGSoB has gained interest not only within SDSU but also throughout the CSU system.

The Inaugural University Global Seal of Biliteracy: A Case Study

At SDSU, the goal of earning the UGSoB was ultimately not only about language proficiency but also about demonstrating holistic bilingualism/biliteracy and the interconnectedness between language(s) and culture(s) while becoming linguistically multicompetent. Students who meet this global requirement must engage in a linguistic and cultural immersion to amplify their linguistic and cultural

ideological consciousness (Alfaro, 2018), which may include a study abroad or a local experience within the region as long as it is connected to critical global projects and learning outcomes.

In an attempt to create a sustainable and longitudinal program around the UGSoB, we embedded a research component into the pilot of this project. We wanted to learn from students' and institutional affiliates' experiences during the UGSoB inaugural year and to garner honest and authentic feedback to help grow and strengthen the program for years to come.

Research and Findings

During the first year of this initiative, focus groups were conducted with students and key institutional partners to discuss the value and process of the program implementation (Glaser, 1965). Eight recipients were interviewed, including an additional student interested in retaking the exam. In addition, three institutional program partners were also interviewed. These partners were faculty members within the participating programs and the instructor of the language support seminars.

Preliminary findings from interviews that aimed to capture students' perspectives about the program and the process revealed the following findings.

Building Confidence: Language learning should not cease after high school

Interviews confirmed that the linguistic and cultural wealth of high school students should continue to hold value in IHEs and as students enter various career paths. Participants suggested that their prior high school exposure to language proficiency testing gave them the confidence to seize opportunities that value and celebrate their native language identity into the university level and the desire to continue their language studies:

"Because I've taken a previous multiliteracy test in high school," one participant shared, "I know what they expected" (UGSoB recipient, 2021). In short, having the biliteracy line lengthened from high school to university increases motivation, readiness, confidence, and success, as one student expressed: "I want to say [the language exam] was easier because I felt confident of what was going to be on [the test]" (UGSoB recipient, 2021).

Likewise, educators have the opportunity and responsibility to build students' confidence by informing them that in today's global economy, professionals who are linguistically multicompetent—individuals who can communicate and interact with intercultural competence—will be in greater demand (Estrada, Lavadenz, Paynter, & Ruiz, 2018; Callahan & Gándara, 2014; Valdés, 2020).

A Newfound Multifaceted Language Perspective

Interviews with UGSoB participants also revealed that the program allowed students to discover their language as multifaceted. Not only were they able to express themselves through their bilingual testimonios, but they also communicated that the process of receiving their UGSoB expanded their perspectives on both the personal and the professional benefits of the UGSoB. One participant, for example, "wanted to see if [passing the exam] was something I could do," both inspired by the idea that demonstrating advanced proficiency would ultimately be a pathway to achieve multiple aspirations: "So [my motivation is] kind of a little bit of both—business and personal" (UGSoB recipient, 2021). The student's recognition that language has multifaceted dimensions was a key driver to inspire students to set a goal and meet it.

Newfound Perspective on Building Credibility through Multilingual Competence

Another recurring theme throughout the focus group interviews was connected to the newfound belief that an UGSoB designation will contribute to greater personal credibility when applying for career opportunities, as expressed by the following comment:

"...in regards to getting that little piece of paper that actually says, you [are proficient] in that level, kind of helps with credibility." (Focus Group 1, pg. 2)

The majority of students expressed that obtaining the UGSoB allowed them to embrace their bilingualism and the belief that better bilingual proficiency would provide greater professional credibility. Participants also expressed that the UGSoB is a powerful tool that recognizes linguistically diverse students capable of dominating more than one language, not only in personal and educational settings but also in professional ones.

UGSoB Impact on Latinx Students

Focus group interviews revealed that Latinx students saw that the recognition of their bilingualism and biliteracy enhanced their appreciation for their cultural and personal experiences. In addition, Latinx participants stated that although receiving the UGSoB had not altered their sense of identity nor their appreciation for being connected to their families, cultures, and countries through Spanish—the UGSoB gave them personal reassurance and a sense of confidence in their Spanish comprehension and speaking abilities.

This feedback is valuable as SDSU strives to be a model for the successful and sustainable implementation of the UGSoB across other HSIs throughout the nation.

Future Considerations

As we continue to build and strengthen pathways and partnerships for the State Seal of Biliteracy to grow and expand into the University Global Seal of Biliteracy at the IHE level, there are some critical questions to consider. We pose the following questions as we continue to labor together in the work of education, language, access, equity, agency, and advocacy:

- What does a UGSoB look like at the university level while promoting access, equity, rigor, prestige, and accountability as we expand in and outside of SDSU, California, and to the world?
- How do we successfully implement, sustain, support, and document this work through a resource guide that can be made available for other IHEs and other languages?
- How can IHEs work closely with school districts to grant students credit for the SSB and create a seamless transition from high school to the university?
- How can IHEs work towards granting an official UGSoB on students' university transcripts and diplomas?

This work, research, and continued critical inquiries will pave the way for the documentation of best practices that will lead to an IHE-UGSoB guide. Such a guide is needed to help develop and implement university policy that supports and values the linguistic wealth students bring to our universities. Moreover, it is incumbent on those of us who continue

to advocate for systemic pathways to organize ourselves and to collectively and collaboratively meet the growing demands and current challenges in preparing linguistically multicompetent global leaders at our respective universities.

We need to look at ways to collaborate and share resources among states and university systems. The time has come to vigorously address the restrictive language policies and dominant ideologies that have caused harm to our educational system. We must find ways to continually and strategically create university pathways for students to expand their linguistic multicompetence to meet rigorous global 21st century standards (Alfaro, 2021).

Discussion

Though we are optimistic about the future, it is well documented in the literature that much work still remains to be done—in order to break down the barriers to access, equity, and inclusion for linguistically diverse students, especially students of color. For example, research shows that while speaking another language should be seen as an asset, students of color who speak a language other than English are not equally recognized as white, bilingual students (Heineke & Davin, 2020a).

Furthermore, students in focus groups claimed they felt more comfortable speaking another language, primarily with their peers. These interactions should not only be valued, but also encouraged institutionally as well (Puig-Mayenco et al., 2018). Hispanic-Serving Institutions, in particular, have the opportunity to lead in this area by incentivizing the value of the Spanish language across educational settings. Therefore, IHEs must prioritize the development of pathways for students to be recognized for their linguistic multicompetence. The UGSoB is, therefore, just one way for IHEs to do this while equalizing the linguistic playing field and by equitably advocating for dual or multilingual language learners and speakers. It is critical that our collective work continues and grows to include all students in service of nurturing and developing multilingual global learners and leaders who will impact the world in greater ways. ☞

References are available in the appendix of the online version: <https://www.gocabe.org/index.php/communications/multilingual-educator/>