



Education Review

Reseñas Educativas

Resenhas Educativas

February 16, 2022

ISSN 1094-5296

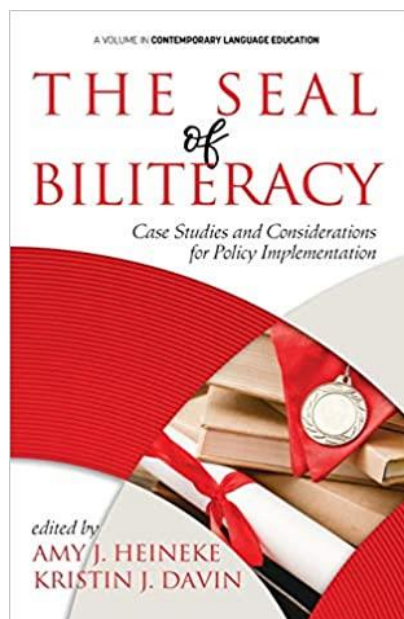
Heineke, A. J., & Davin, K. J. (Eds.) (2020). *The Seal of Biliteracy: Case studies and considerations for policy implementation*. Information Age Publishing.

Pp. 218

ISBN: 978-1-64802-022-3

Reviewed by Liv Halaas Detwiler  
University of Tennessee Knoxville  
United States

In *The Seal of Biliteracy: Case Studies and Considerations for Policy Implementation*, Amy J. Heineke and Kristin J. Davin have compiled a comprehensive collection of literature outlining the implementation of the Seal of Biliteracy (SoBL) across the United States. The SoBL is an award given by a school, district, or state in recognition of students who have studied and attained proficiency in two or more languages by high school graduation. This recognition usually takes the form of a gold seal on a student's high school diploma or transcript. Heineke and Davin's edited volume first provides background on California's grassroots movement toward improved educational support for an influx of Hispanic immigrant students in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which then led to the implementation of the SoBL across various states in the US during the early 2000s.



The intent of this volume is to strengthen the available literature on the SoBL by examining the effect of existing SoBL programs on language education. At the date of publication, the SoBL had been adopted in 38 states, “with various stakeholders coming together to enact policies intended to promote students’ bilingualism and biliteracy via language education in schools and communities” (p. 35). According to the official SoBL website, 45 states have now approved the “State Seal”, with Wyoming and South Dakota in early planning stages, while Pennsylvania, Alabama and Alaska currently have it under consideration. This fast-growing movement makes the present

volume even more necessary as it provides research-based evidence on successes and needed areas of improvement regarding SoBL policy and implementation. The goal of the text is to address the following research questions:

- How do states' SoBL policies and practices differ?
- What paths have states taken to enact the SoBL and whose voices and choices guide these policy journeys?
- What successes and challenges do schools face as they implement the SoBL?
- What do students perceive as benefits and barriers to the SoBL?
- In what ways do states' policies prioritize English-dominant students versus linguistically diverse students? (p. viii)

The contributors attempt to address these questions in order to both strengthen existing SoBL programs as well as support states, regions, or districts interested in implementing it.

Amy Heineke is an associate professor of Bilingual/Bicultural Education at Loyola University in Chicago who specializes in language policy and teacher preparation for English Language Learners (ELLs). Her work is informed by experience as an ELL classroom teacher in Phoenix, Arizona. Kristin Davin is an associate professor at the University of North Carolina Charlotte specializing in second language teacher preparation, language assessment, and the SoBL. Dr. Davin previously worked as a K-12 Spanish teacher. All contributing authors are highly qualified in the fields of educational administration, foreign language education, teaching English as a second language, curriculum and instruction, and other related fields. While each chapter examines the implementation of the SoBL in different contexts and from differing viewpoints, the synthesized findings support the editors' initial concern that "while the SoBL ignites new passion and interest in language education, we see concerns about uneven participation – both across states and within schools" (p. viii).

Because SoBL policy stemmed from a grassroots movement and was not rolled out as a federally supported program, implementation can vary from region to region. The editors have chosen a variety of regions to highlight in this collection. These selected regions are quite different in their population make-up (California, Minnesota, Massachusetts, suburban Illinois, Los Angeles Unified School District, a Washington state district and additional vignettes for Hawaii and New Jersey). While this range does offer perspectives from inner cities with high populations of ELLs, states with significant populations of less commonly taught languages, and suburban atmospheres, it does lack representation from Southern states that might introduce different cultural priorities or opinions.

The volume is divided into four parts, beginning with a chapter outlining considerations for policy implementation. This first chapter serves as a good

roadmap for readers as they navigate the subsequent chapters and consider implementation in their own state, district or school. This first part also includes the historical background of the grassroots movement that grew in response to anti-immigrant and English-only sentiments in California in the 1970s and 1980s as Hispanic populations sharply increased, prompting the SoBL. Parts two and three offer case studies from three different states and three different schools or districts who have implemented the policy. These case studies, while somewhat repetitive when read sequentially, offer diverse perspectives from which a reader can select when trying to find a comparable state, region or scenario to their own. Vignettes or narrations are embedded in most chapters, which help illustrate the unique benefits or challenges faced by each region when implementing the policy.

In particular, the chapter pertaining to the Los Angeles Unified School District's implementation of the SoBL (section three) stands out. After the somewhat repetitive nature of the, albeit very well written, case studies, this chapter was a welcome change of pace. It is the only qualitative study, which gives voices to the student and faculty participants who are not otherwise directly highlighted in the text, yet are critical players. While the author's research goals align well with the rest of the text, however, sometimes the decontextualized student quotations fell short of supporting the arguments presented.

The fourth and final section includes two chapters that directly address significant equity concerns in implementing the SoBL. These two chapters present a tone of caution as well as a call to action. The SoBL can either exacerbate a continued problem of equity between two groups of learners (ELL vs. World Language Learners [WLLs]) or, with significant revisions, could be the tool needed to move towards a more unified and inclusive approach to language learning, validation, and credentialing. It is important to note as well that if played right, the SoBL could be helpful in shifting the paradigm from grammar-based to proficiency-based instruction, a critical update that is still yet to fully take hold in world language education in the United States, as mentioned periodically throughout the text.

Several authors mention that implementing the SoBL has enhanced community collaborations via task forces and increased parental involvement in language education. Given that implementing SoBL policy does not come coupled with federal funding, a motivated staff member or team within the district must take on the hefty work load. This can lead to irregular implementation over time and significant differences between regional practices. Nonetheless, the data collection required for tracking students' progress towards achieving the SoBL can identify areas of need within the curriculum.

Overall, the volume's contributors are well aligned regarding pedagogical consequences and continued challenges that the implementation of SoBL policy presents. Many authors highlight the importance of states, districts, and schools moving away from a subtractive view of bilingualism, as in the

case of ELLs, towards an additive approach by supporting the maintenance and development of their native languages. Dr. Davin notes that the “SoBL represents a step toward recognizing linguistic diversity in the United States as an asset rather than a problem” (p. 4). Most all contributing authors highlight the persistent issue of equity in implementation. This includes equitable access throughout the country, assessments for lesser-known languages, comparable policy expectations and implementation across regions, and most importantly equitable expectations in language proficiency standards for ELLs and WLLs alike. Currently, implementation favors WLLs, which is contradictory to the initial goal of supporting the ELL population and closing achievement gaps.

All contributors, despite sometimes heavy criticism of current SoBL realities, remain optimistic about its potential to effect change in the field of language education in the United States. The optimism is clearly stated in each chapter, but the hurdles seem enormous, especially when reading the last two chapters regarding equity and the need for major societal shift in perceptions. There is a persistent societal view that non-native English speakers learning English are seen as “deficient” while learning another world language for English native speakers is seen as “enrichment” (p. 163). As it stands, the last two authors fear that the SoBL could further engrain this perception if action is not taken to improve the approaches in SoBL implementation. As J. K. Fisk writes in chapter 9, “Efforts to implement the SoBL as a means to promote equity must be continuous” (p. 153).

So, the larger question stands – Is *The Seal of Biliteracy* a true catalyst for change as the editors claim? The volume is a well-curated collection of research investigating past and current practice in implementing the SoBL, but likely to solely pique the interests of researchers in the area of language education, rather than classroom practitioners or district administrators who are the ones directly involved in implementation. For an individual practitioner or school community looking to implement the policy, selecting the chapter that aligns with their community make-up may suffice, along with an SoBL toolkit from key stakeholders. It would be a misstep, nonetheless, for these taskforces looking to enact SoBL in their districts to overlook the last two chapters of the book.

Despite widespread policy adoption across the country, every case study has highlighted similar challenges regarding equitable access and implementation. The overarching takeaway from the text is, yes, the SoBL does serve as a catalyst for change by demanding that we face hard questions of what is important. It requires that language programs assess whether their programs are truly pushing students towards language proficiency. It demands that districts explore ways to better support the native languages of their ELL students. It brings students, language educators, administrators, policy makers and the wider community to engage in the realities and needs of language education. If we do not bring people to the table to discuss a common goal, then how can we effect change? With nearly 50 states

participating, the SoBL movement has successfully brought the parties to the table. Let's get started.

---


### About the Reviewer

**Liv Halaas Detwiler** is currently a lecturer in world languages in the Department of Theory and Practice in Teacher Education at the University of Tennessee Knoxville, as well as a PhD student. She previously taught Spanish at both secondary and university levels, and worked for many years with the Concordia Language Villages.



*Education Review/Reseñas Educativas/Resenhas Educativas* is supported by the Scholarly Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, distribute, and adapt this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and *Education Review*, the changes are identified, and the same license applies to the derivative work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

**Disclaimer:** The views or opinions presented in book reviews are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of *Education Review*.

 Connect with *Education Review* on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Education-Review/178358222192644>) and on Twitter @EducReview