

# The Implementational and Ideological Spaces of the Seal of Biliteracy for World Language Education

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Since its 2011 legislative enactment in California, the Seal of Biliteracy (SoBl) has emerged as a policy *tour de force* in language education across 37 states and the District of Columbia. As SoBl policies show large variation from state to state, district to district, and school to school, questions arise as to what the SoBl award means for various stakeholders in a nation where world languages have historically taken a back seat. This paper first takes an ecological approach in identifying, situating, and tracking the trajectories of primary discourses produced through advocacy efforts and adaptations of the SoBl. I, then, consider how these discourses work to develop implementational and ideological spaces—which interact with one another in both collaborative and confrontational ways—in the contexts of world language educational policy, curriculum, and instruction.

Empirical evidence has validated the enormous personal, professional, and societal benefits of multilingualism. What is less clear is how to communicate these rich and significant benefits to those who are in decision-making capacities. (Moeller & Abbott, 2018, p. 21)

While Moeller and Abbott posed this conundrum in 2018, K–12 instruction for languages other than English in the United States has a deeply rooted legacy of being widely unregulated, underfunded, and undervalued (Met, 1994). In the past decade, however, the Seal of Biliteracy (SoBl) has emerged as a distinctly notable policy initiative attempting to persuade various stakeholders of the benefits of multilingualism. Adopted at the state legislative level, the SoBl aims to cultivate and foster the knowledge of world languages among K–12 students and schools by awarding students with proficiency in two or more languages a special seal on their diploma. As iterations of the SoBl policy have been promoted and adapted from state to state, as advantageous for world language education in particular, the varying trajectories of the SoBl—along with the discourses surrounding it—warrant closer investigation within this context. In this paper, I consider the ways in which the SoBl has been discursively mobilized as a world language policy and means of world language planning in K–12 education (Heineke & Davin, 2018), but also question whether the policy has spread throughout other educational, professional, and societal domains as advocates claim. How—and to what extent—has the SoBl changed the landscape of world language education for policymakers, teachers, and students?

## Conceptual Framework

### Ecology of Language and Orientations

In order to develop a robust understanding of how the SoBl is situated in the greater context of world language education<sup>1</sup> in the United States, I employ an ecological approach to language policy, originally proposed by Haugen (1972), as a way of thinking about multilingualism (Johnson, 2013). While there are a range of ecological conceptualizations that have been developed within the field of language policy and planning (LPP), Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) discuss the management of “the language ecology of a particular language to support it within the vast cultural, educational, historical, demographic, political, social structure in which language policy formulation occurs every day” (p. 13), bringing attention to a complex and multifaceted array of situational influences. Hornberger (2002) also identifies language environment as a key ecological paradigm. In setting the stage for a closer look at the SoBl, I pay particular attention to the historical and sociopolitical ecology of world language education in the United States, employing Ruiz’s (1984a) orientations in language planning in education as an overarching classification scheme. Ruiz proposed that language policies treat languages through a *language-as-problem* orientation, *language-as-right* orientation, or *language-as-resource* orientation. Although Ruiz originally developed his orientations in reference to the treatment of minority languages in education, they also prove useful in more broadly considering the status of languages other than English in education. Additionally, while ecological perspectives to studying language policy often emphasize the interactions and relationships between different languages in the linguistic ecosystem (Johnson, 2013), I purposefully take a macro approach to this analysis by highlighting K–12 world language education as a single unit to consider its marginalization in comparison to English. However, important distinctions exist with Spanish—as the majority language spoken by students classified as *English learners* and the dominant language of bilingual education in the U.S.—and with various languages of Western European origin (such as Spanish, French, German, Italian, etc.) that have a long-established tradition of being taught in American schools—both of which will be addressed in the following analysis.

### Layers of the Onion and Implementational or Ideological Spaces

In their 1996 paper dissecting the role of English language teachers in enacting language policy, Ricento and Hornberger introduce the metaphor of the onion as a theoretical heuristic for LPP. They emphasize the various “agents, levels, and process of LPP in terms of layers that together make up the LPP whole” (p. 408). Hornberger and Johnson (2007) further extend this metaphor in asserting that ethnographies of language policy are particularly adept at illuminating interactions between layers, as well as unpacking the ideological and implementational spaces produced by any language planning policy. Ideological and implementational

<sup>1</sup> While *foreign language education* is still widely used to describe the teaching of other languages in the United States, many scholars have acknowledged its problematic connotations of monolingualism and otherness (Kubota & Austin, 2007; Wiley & García, 2016). In this paper, I employ the largely synonymous term *world language education* (although it is not without flaw) to reflect the lexical and ideological shift in both academic and educational settings.

spaces interact with one another, function at different layers of the onion, and can be “wedge[d] open” (p. 512), filled up, or closed down. Though limited in scope, this paper adopts an ethnographic lens by treating these spaces as analytical focal points. Looking at the multilayered interactions between the ideological discourses and implementational arenas created, reinforced, or neglected by the SoBl is essential to evaluate its impacts on world language education.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

Analysis of the ideological spaces open for world language education by the SoBl also entails consideration of the discourses produced through advocacy and adoption of the SoBl. Fairclough (2013) views both written and spoken texts as transmitting socially and historically situated discourses; as Johnson (2013) summarizes, “Any particular language policy text—the written or spoken product of language policy discourse—is a product of discourse practices that should be analyzed within multi-layered discursive contexts of situation e.g., institutional and societal discourses about language, language users, language education, etc.” (p. 156). Much of the discourse purporting the advantages of the SoBl for world language education is reproduced through policy documents, but also websites, news articles, and social media feeds—all of which are situated within overlapping ideological spaces generated by different actors with varying agendas. Across this corpus of documents related to the SoBl are several discourses that lexically and semantically repeat, signaling dominant ideologies around both the purpose of the SoBl for stakeholders and for the state of world language education as a whole. Integrating the aforementioned theoretical traditions and concepts, I address the following questions around the SoBl in this paper:

- What are the various implementational and ideological spaces—in the context of world language education policy—for the SoBl in the United States?
- How has the SoBl been picked up at different layers of the LPP onion?
- What types of discourse are circulating in the policy push for states or districts to adopt the SoBl?
- How do these implementational and ideological spaces work with or against one another?

### **Literature Review: Situating the SoBl Historically and Ecologically**

In identifying ideological and implementational spaces associated with SoBl policies, it is important to consider how such implementations of the SoBl are positioned within the greater ecological context of world language education in the United States. The following section illuminates several factors that are particularly relevant to framing these spaces and their interactions with one another: the history of world language education policy in the United States, shifts in world language standards, curriculum, and best teaching practices, and the origins of the SoBl as a grassroots initiative established within a bilingual educational context.

The emergence and interstate spread of the SoBl as a language education policy initiative is remarkable, considering the relative historical dearth of such policies in the U.S. Despite the assertive dominance of English in social, political, and educational

institutions, the United States historically has had no national, overarching policy dictating an official language of use in these spheres (Met, 1994; Wiley & García, 2016). K–12 Language education in the US has been differentially treated throughout American history—sometimes valued as preparing students to engage in an increasingly global world, other times regarded as a necessary means of making education equitable for all learners, but often imbued with an air of fear or indifference. Prominent LPP scholars have identified and commented on significant periods in U.S. language educational policy, the more recent instances of which I will briefly summarize in the following table (Ruiz, 1984a; Ruiz 1984b; Spolsky, 2011; Wiley & García, 2016). I align these periods with Ruiz’s (1984a) orientations to create an overarching picture of ideologies towards the presence of other languages in U.S. schools. I also integrate Ruiz’s (2006) critical commentary on the positioning of languages other than English as threats throughout U.S. history with his language-as-problem orientation (1984a).

Table 1

*Historical View of Orientations of Language Education Policy in U.S. Schools*

Time period	Description of policies	Orientation (Ruiz, 1984a; Ruiz, 2006)
WW1 era 1910–1920s	Anti German legislation passed in 34 states making English the only language of instruction; Response to German–English bilingual education throughout various states	Language-as-problem or threat
Sputnik era (1950’s)	National Defense Act (1958) promoted teaching of critical languages such as Russian, Chinese, etc.	Language-as-resource
Civil Rights era (1960’s–1970’s)	Bilingual Education Act (1968) provided funds for teaching languages other than English	Language-as-right
English-only era (1998–2002)	Passage of English-only legislation in CA, AZ, and MA curtailing bilingual education in an effort to promote English education	Language-as-problem or threat
Standards era (2002)	Expiration of Bilingual Education Act and passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB); Decline in world language programs due to testing pressures, renewed emphasis on English acquisition	Language-as-expendable (my own addition)

This table helps to illustrate the dearth of specific policies that are concerned with the teaching of languages outside of a bilingual education context. World language education is only directly and broadly furthered in the Sputnik era, when knowledge of other languages was deemed critical to American security and progress. Otherwise, world languages are deemed threatening or neutral. In the standards era, world language education is marked by an absence of explicit policy as other subjects (math and English, namely) are emphasized, once again, for the sake of American progress. In his own set of language policy orientations,

Wiley (2002) refers to a lack of policy around languages as *tolerance-oriented policies*. While world language education post NCLB standards could be viewed through a tolerance lens, it is perhaps more sensible to highlight the intention behind the classification of languages as elective courses and the comparative lack of support or funding for language programs in schools. I thus contribute the orientation of *language-as-expendable* to reflect the general ideologies around the worth and utility of languages other than English as part of the K–12 school curriculum. Overall declines in world language education, enrollment, and federal support over the past 50 years point to the dominance of this orientation (Hellmich, 2018; Wiley & García, 2016).

The absence of explicit, top-down policies around world language education means that the implementational space for educational LPP in schools generally falls at the state, local, or institutional levels (Wiley & García, 2016). Even at the state level, however, the overall apathy and lack of priority granted towards world language education at the national level appears to trickle down. States rarely mandate students to take world languages for an extended period of time, if at all, and generally do not offer such instruction until high school (Met, 1994; Wiley & García, 2016). O'Rourke, Zhou, and Rottman (2016) found that only seven states (including the District of Columbia) required coursework or proficiency in a world language for graduation, 22 states allowed world language to fulfill a fine arts or professional studies (elective) requirement, and the remaining 22 states had no world language study required for graduation. Even in the seven states where world language study was deemed necessary for graduation, only one to two years of study were required by state mandate. While this does not mean that local districts and schools do not put their own requirements in place for world language study, it does point to the local, innermost layer of the world language policy onion as having the most implementational power (Met, 1994; O'Rourke, Zhou, & Rottman, 2016). Unfortunately, the surprising shortage of data within states around which languages are offered or required in which schools or districts makes it difficult to paint a detailed picture of world language education.

### **Shifts in World Language Standards, Curriculum, and Best Teaching Practices**

The limited and differential policy provisions provided for world language education reflects a lack of consensus at the national, state, and local levels around what purposes are served by the learning of other languages (Kubota & Austin, 2007). To further understand the muddled state of world language education, it is also relevant to consider the history of how world languages have traditionally been taught (when and if they are taught, of course) in the classroom. Historically, language instruction has been textbook-driven and largely focused on grammar, translation, and literary domains, leaving communication as an instructional afterthought (Met, 1994; Richards & Rodgers, 1986, as cited in Wiley & García, 2016). However, a gradual shift in the field of applied linguistics towards an emphasis on communicative competence has supported more communicative, proficiency-based models of language instruction. This shift is reflected in the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages*, originally published in 1996 as part of the mid-1990's standards movement and also referred to as

the *National Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (Abbot & Phillips, 2011; Met, 2008 ). These content standards, developed through the collaborative efforts of many professional language associations and stakeholders, emphasize what are commonly known as the 5 C's, or Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015). Such goals, in the words of the ACTFL website, “create a roadmap to guide learners to develop competence to communicate effectively and interact with cultural understanding” and have been updated over the years to promote “real-world applications” (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015).

While the World Readiness Standards (hereafter Standards) were provided, in part, to galvanize changes in world language curriculum development and classroom instruction, ensuring that teachers shift from more traditional, outdated modes of language education remains a challenge (Met, 1994). Although the Standards may reflect much of the professional research and literature, their adaptation (despite being marketed as a national policy) is voluntary at the state level (Met, 2008). Even though many states have used the Standards as a model for their own, questions remain as to whether the infrastructure exists to affect changes in language teacher professional development, teacher training, or curricular materials (Dorwick & Glass, 2003). Additionally, teacher beliefs about which methods are most appropriate and efficient for imparting linguistic knowledge may very well be in conflict with a proficiency-based approach (Kaplan, 2016). Consequently, even when world language courses are provided for students, the curricular content, form of assessment, and pedagogical approach utilized in world language instruction may not align with what advocates for world language education consider best policy or practice.

### **Origins of the SoBl: A Bilingual Educational Grassroots Initiative?**

The SoBl initiative has been annexed by world language education advocates across many states, but it is important to note that it was originally conceptualized in California, a state with a large body of emergent Spanish–English bilingual students and a complicated history with bilingual education. *Californians Together*—a statewide advocacy coalition linking together teachers, administrators, parents, and non-profit organizations—conceived of the SoBl initiative in 2008 and mobilized at the local level for schools and districts across California to implement the award (Heineke & Davin, 2018). Eventually, through Assembly Bill No. 815 in 2011, the SoBl was legislatively established and ratified in California at the state level.

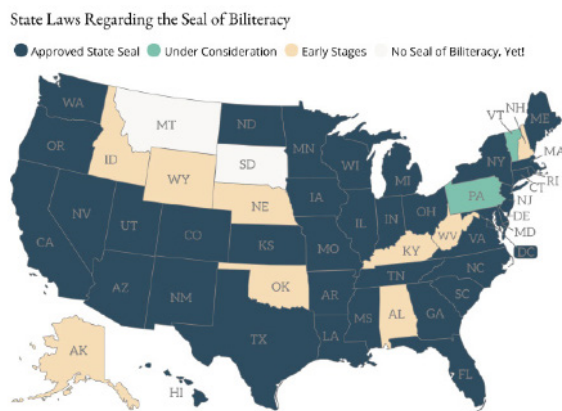
Although there is no explicit mention of English learners in the initial description of the Seal of Biliteracy policy on their website's *Frequently Asked Questions* page, it is clear that the SoBl was developed with supporting English learners in mind: the logo of *Californians Together* on their website includes the slogan, *Championing the Success of English Learners*, and their mission promotes increasing educational equity and access through “better educating 1.4 million English Learners.” The SoBl initiative, as it was created 10 years before the passage of Proposition 58—which repealed 20 years of English-only legislative victory Proposition 227 restricting bilingual education—can be viewed in the ideological context of bilingual education advocacy. Underpinning such efforts is the belief in educational equity for emerging bilingual Spanish-speaking

students. Even eight years after the first state outside of California incorporated the SoBl, it appears to still heavily index English learners or bilingual education. Out of the five questions that are addressed on the SoBl site's *Frequently Asked Questions* page, Questions 3 and 4 explicitly reference English learners or Spanish speakers in assuaging readers that the SoBl is an award for all students who reach proficiency in two languages: Is the SoBl just for English learners? Is this just for Spanish speakers? What about other language groups? Another point of note in considering the SoBl's California origins is the bottom-up implementational trajectory that the SoBl executed. Does the SoBl truly fit the definition of a grassroots policy initiative? Considering the involvement of larger advocacy organizations in California from its inception, this may not be the case—but regardless of these organizations' participation, support and incorporation of the SoBl in California accumulated locally, school by school and district by district, before achieving statewide recognition.

### Current Seal of Biliteracy Landscape

Over the course of the following eight years, the SoBl established ground in a snowballing number of states, with seven states adopting the seal in 2016 and eight in 2018. As shown in Figure 1, as of December 15, 2019, a Seal of Biliteracy policy has officially been incorporated in 38 states (including the District of Columbia), is awaiting legislative approval in two states, and is in the early stages of advocacy in nine states, leaving only two states (Montana and South Dakota) in which there is currently no version of the SoBl under discussion.

Figure 1. State Laws Regarding the SoBl as of December 15, 2019 (sealofbiliteracy.org)



How did a language education policy that was rooted in one state—with a very specific linguistic history and ecology—manage to spread so effectively to other states? Broadly, the parallel advocacy efforts of a range of national language groups working to promote the SoBl alongside the work of individuals and local organizations within each state have functioned collaboratively across layers of the onion. After the SoBl was successfully passed in California, national organizations such as ACTFL, National Association for Bilingual Education

(NABE), and TESOL International Association disseminated the news across the U. S. and touted it as a success for language educational policy. Various supporters in each state mobilized and worked to find a legislative opening for implementing the policy (Heineke & Davin, 2018). As Heineke and Davin (2018) found through interviews with SoBl stakeholders, at the micro-level, states varied somewhat in their implementational pathways to adopting the SoBl. Some states such as New Jersey, like California, produced legislation after the localized adoption of the SoBl in schools and districts. In other cases, states sought legislative sponsorship before seeking local implementation. What these varying pathways help to indicate is that different educational stakeholders at different levels of the LPP union initiated the SoBl process. In all cases, however, “interested citizens...initiated broader discussions to push forward code or legislation related to the Seal of Biliteracy, rather than policies enforced from the top-down by state or federal government actors” (Heineke & Davin, 2018, p. 13).

## Methodology

### Intertextuality

Johnson (2015) delineates the use of intertextual analysis as a valuable LPP methodology to link the various discourses and texts produced throughout iterations of a policy. Regardless of their codification, language policies never reside in isolation; the meanings of such policies are only produced and accurately interpreted from the interplay between past and present texts and discourses. In particular, Johnson (2015) highlights the notion of recontextualization—that a text’s meaning is dependent and subject to the context in which it is interpreted, and thus ever-evolving with new contexts—reminding us of both the subjectivity of meaning-making and of the limitations of authorial intentions. Supporting a shift from analyzing intention to analyzing interpretation, Johnson asserts that “intertextual LPP analysis can illuminate where the ideas and language in a document might come from, how they are connected to other texts and discourses, and what this might mean for those responsible for interpreting, appropriating, or implementing the policy” (2015, p. 169). In accordance with this theoretical position, I chose to look at the interactions between a broad range of texts and discourses around the SoBl in order to find emerging trends in meaning. Additionally, I focus my analysis less on authorial intentions behind top-down iterations of the SoBl policy and more on the potential interpretations and appropriations of the policy across the world language union.

### Discursive Policy and Media Context

In order to gain a comprehensive picture of the implementational and ideological spaces created by the SoBl for world language education, it is important to consider the fundamental role of SoBl policy texts in propagating particular discourses. I chose to primarily focus my analysis on the online resources, publications and media made available through *sealofbiliteracy.org*, the official website of the SoBl run by *Californians Together* and *Velázquez Press*, as well as the official websites of national language organizations involved in SoBl advocacy efforts (ACTFL, NABE, TESOL International Association). Not only does the SoBl



website serve as a hub for information about the SoBl through various pages and tabs including *Steps to Implement*, *Resources*, *Frequently Asked Questions*, but it also shares a link to each participating state's designated SoBl policy; I reviewed the corresponding web pages and documents, in comparison with the materials available on the official SoBl site, to identify influential discourses around the SoBl as the policy moved from state to state.

The power of media serves as an essential means of disseminating language policy ideologies that reproduce, interact with, and contribute to language policy texts (Johnson, 2013, p. 157). The SoBl website's homepage holds a *Social Stream*, which shares content posted on the SoBl's Twitter account. While a SoBl Facebook page also exists, it appears to primarily share the same media as its Twitter page. Consequently, I chose to focus on examining the SoBl's Twitter feed in order to identify possible ideologies around the SoBl. I analyzed the sources, shared external content (such as articles, links, and quotes) and original discourse of all tweets published in the month of April 2019—the data collection period, as a representative subset. Along with analyzing social media, I aimed to explore other discourses circulating throughout the media around the SoBl. In addition to the articles shared through SoBl accounts, I searched online news articles for mention of the SoBl, coding for any discussion of the purpose of the SoBl award and purported benefits. While my search was not comprehensive, my goal was to develop a sense of the dominant media discourses around the SoBl at a macro level.

In peeling apart the layers of the SoBl policy onion, it is also valuable to consider the uptake of the SoBl in the discursive sphere of academia. A search of academic databases for peer-reviewed publications related to SoBl policy was also conducted. While limited sources were available, Kristin Davin, Amy Heineke, and Linda Egnatz were found to have been contributing to the SoBl literature consistently for the past several years. Their work served as particularly helpful in considering its implementational and ideological spaces for world language education. Furthermore, I carried out a systematic search of the websites of U.S. News and World Report's top 50 national universities, which include both public and private universities and span a number of states that have incorporated the SoBl, as a metric to look at university uptake of the SoBl.

## Analysis

### Vast and Vague Implementational Arenas

The SoBl's expansion across 37 states and the District of Columbia is unprecedented, particularly considering the fragmented and locale-specific legacy of language education policies in the United States. In line with historical tradition, there is no national legislation supporting the SoBl; states still hold the jurisdiction in deciding whether or not to sign a SoBl initiative into law. However, it could be argued that the SoBl has the implementational potential to operate on a national scale, albeit in a piecemeal manner, if eventually incorporated in every state, which seems likely in considering the SoBl map of state laws in progress. In many ways, it has already achieved semi-national reach through the sheer number of states who have adopted the initiative and the advocacy support provided by a band of language organizations at the national level. As such, the SoBl's uptake implies a

broader implementational space for K–12 world language education and language education in general (Davin & Heineke, 2017). Additionally, rhetoric emphasizing economic incentives and necessary global skills is used to promote the benefits of the SoBl, extending the implementational space past the K–12 educational domain into professional and higher education sectors.

While this appears promising from the outside, a closer inspection reveals that the adoption of the SoBl by a state legislature does not ensure that the SoBl is available throughout the state. In the majority of states, the SoBl remains an optional initiative for stakeholders at the district and school levels, who decide whether they want to offer the award for their students (Davin & Heineke, 2017); this makes it difficult to ensure that implementation is effected from school to school and district to district. It would seem that this is in keeping with both the historically limited role that states have played in regulating world language education and the grassroots origins of the SoBl policy in California. Consequently, the SoBl implementation remains largely rooted in localized efforts, and the potential implementational space for the policy is so vast, decentralized, and unregulated that it remains to be seen whether it truly functions as implementational or not.

While there are many cases of successful SoBl implementation in a vast number of states, there are significant variations in the structure, requirements, and accessibility of the policy for world language learners. Davin and Heineke (2017) found variation in the required level of world language proficiency by state ranging from Low-Intermediate all the way to Mid-Advanced on the ACTFL proficiency scale. Some states offer several tiers of awards corresponding to proficiency level, while others only offer a general SoBl. States also differ notably in what they deem acceptable proof of language proficiency. Scores on validated language assessments such as the AP exam, IB exam, and the ACTFL Assessment of Performance Towards Proficiency in Language are the most common method for proving proficiency, but some states allow seat time in a language, minimum GPA requirements, or language portfolios or alternative assessments to count (Davin & Heineke 2017). Some states ask for success in only one of these pathways to issue a SoBl, while others require multiple methods. The District of Columbia, with some of the most exacting conditions, also asks that students “show evidence of cultural competency and evidence of having used the language in the community” (Davin & Heineke, 2017, p. 491).

Additionally, there is further variation by state in the availability of financial support for mandatory language assessments, required proof of English Language Proficiency, and opportunities available for learners or speakers of less common languages to earn the Seal, raising issues of equity and access to the SoBl for students (Heineke, Davin, & Bedford, 2018). All of these variations greatly limit the practical implementational arena of the SoBl, and raise questions as to whether the implementational space of a SoBl policy extends past its particular state.

### **Prominent Ideological Spaces and Discourses Around the SoBl**

The differential paths to official legislation of the SoBl, involving many different stakeholders, raise questions of whether the SoBl reinforces certain ideological spaces around language or creates new ones altogether. As SoBl policies have rapidly swept from state to state, which ideological spaces and discourses have

come to the surface at a macro level? Despite its foundations in supporting equity for English learners and championing bilingual education, the SoBl has been taken up by those advocating for language education in general—which, in many educational contexts, primarily indexes world language education. Despite its foundations in supporting equity for English learners and championing bilingual education, the SoBl has been taken up by those advocating for language education in general—which, in many educational contexts, primarily indexes world language education (Subtirelu et al., 2019). Heineke and Davin (2018) point out that states such as Hawaii and Washington—which, like California, have large populations of English learners and corresponding histories of advocacy—may have framed the SoBl more specifically to support the abilities of heritage language speakers and emergent bilinguals. However, many other states in enacting the SoBl emphasized that the initiative was designed to honor all students who achieve proficiency in two languages. In particular, two emergent discourses and advocacy approaches have contributed to the ideological space reinforced through the SoBl for supporting world language education. These discourses, outlined below, are intertextual in nature, emerging from a range of promotional, policy, and social media materials in conversation with one another.

### **Discourse 1: Universally Positive Uncritical Support for Languages**

The first is a flexible, asset-based discourse that views any increase in opportunities or provisions for language study, or any increase in knowledge or awareness about languages, as a boon for the SoBl and language education in general. This discursive approach characterizes the online forms of outreach used by the Seal of Biliteracy website's homepage, which features a Social Stream that highlights tweets from the SoBl official, regularly active Twitter account in the month of April 2019, for example, it posted 124 tweets averaging around four posts a day.<sup>2</sup> In scrolling through the SoBl's Twitter page, it becomes evident that there is a wide range of content disseminated that touches on many educational, social, and political domains. In some instances, this content is very specific to the SoBl, such as retweets of congratulations to students who have earned a SoBl or profiles of the efforts of local districts in establishing the SoBl, but in many other instances, the content provided only tangentially relates to the SoBl or language study at all. Sample links include: "Study suggests Sino-Tibetan language family originated in present-day northern China" (phys.org; posted on April 29, 2019); "Foreign languages ought to be an asset for politicians—not a liability." (economist.com; April 28, 2019); "A very Catholic reason you should learn a new language" (aleteia.org; posted on April 28, 2019); "The Surprising Connection between Cinco de Mayo and the Civil War" (history.com; tweeted on May 5, 2019), and "Lack of Oxford comma costs Maine dairy company \$5 million" (usatoday.com; posted on April 11, 2019). Additionally, there have been several tweets on the SoBl feed highlighting Pete Buttigieg's (a 2020 Democratic presidential candidate) multilingualism, including a retweet of a South Dakota superintendent who stated, "Another reason to love @PeteButtigieg: he's fluent in seven (count 'em, 7) languages other than English. @BiliteracySeal" (April 16, 2019).

The content of these tweets, along with the diverse sources of media they feature

<sup>2</sup> <https://twitter.com/BiliteracySeal>

suggest that the discourses around promoting the SoBl operate by the principle that any and everything supporting language in any way is good. Such discourses create and maintain a flexible ideological space for advocacy that is fairly uncritical of certain political connotations, religious beliefs, or folk language ideologies that such content may carry and perpetuate. Several factors likely contribute to this hyper positive discourse promoted through SoBl official online outreach. Firstly, since effective promotion on social media platforms is thought to rely on generating consistent, frequent, and captivating posts, there is insufficient content that relates specifically and engagingly to SoBl initiatives or implementation. Secondly, the wide swath of discourse produced may also be a strategic attempt to maximize awareness of the SoBl through grabbing the attention of various stakeholders by whatever means possible, reflecting the traditional, relatively bottom-up policy pathways that the SoBl takes across the board.

This sweeping, all-inclusive approach to advocating for SoBl uptake manifests not only through social media, but also in the policy implementation guidelines that states develop. In Massachusetts, for example, the Massachusetts Language Opportunity Coalition created a *Seal of Biliteracy Toolkit* to support district or school leaders throughout the implementation process. The toolkit provides a list of purposes for why districts should implement the SoBl, inviting leaders to pick and choose among the arguments they think will be most effective:

A first step towards implementing a Seal of Biliteracy or Pathway Awards is to clarify for your school, community, or district the purpose for giving the awards and to articulate the “frame” and rationale (see examples of purpose on page 3 & 4) that will resonate in your community. In one community, the emphasis on 21st century skills and jobs may resonate most deeply. In another, emphasizing learning respect for diversity and bringing students together across communities may be the most powerful rationale. Recognizing a student who can demonstrate the level of competency of an intermediate or advanced speaker of another language is also a powerful message. (Seal of Biliteracy Workgroup, 2017, p. 4)

Intertextual meanings emerge at the intersection of this official SoBl policy with discourses around language recorded on social media sites (Fairclough, 2013; Johnson, 2015). Each of the rationales provided above illustrates markedly different ideologies around who and what the SoBl is intended to support, yet are treated here as equitable pathways to the initial goal of getting the SoBl established. While this does not imply that advocates for the SoBl believe that all of these purposes are equally worthy, it indicates that a) the SoBl is viewed as a potential means to all of these ends; and b) ideological flexibility and selective choosing of language learning goals may be necessary for effecting overall change in language education, whether world, bilingual, or heritage (Spolsky, 2011). These strategic framings of the SoBl are thus in line with the broader discursive landscape surrounding world language study.

This open ideological space and the mobilization around the SoBl is congruent with America’s historical neglect of K–12 world language education. In an underdeveloped, decentralized language policy arena, the unlikely spread of the SoBl initiative across a majority of states implies a unique potential for progress

and change. However, this expansion of implementational spaces for the SoBl may have also diminished the original conception and intention of the SoBl. From its inception, the SoBl focused on recognizing the bilingual skills of English learners but now the policy appears to be obscured by a narrative of language learning and resource for all—which, when framed as such, inevitably prioritizes the bilingualism of English-dominant students over that of language-minoritized students (Davin, Heineke, & Bedford, 2018; Subtirelu, Borowczyk, Thorson Hernández, & Venezia, 2019).

The difficulty of achieving implementational space for world language policy, combined with trends towards a selective and strategic choice of ideological frames in marketing the SoBl, results in a closing of space for discourses supporting English learners. This is evident according to Davin, Heineke, and Bedford (2018), as two-thirds of states designing SoBl policies neglected any explicit mention of English learners. From an intertextual perspective, the recontextualization of the SoBl within numerous state policy documents and the broader social media sphere has linked it to overly generalized—and consequently, exclusionary—language education rhetoric (Johnson, 2015).

## **Discourse 2: Languages are Instrumental Tools for Success**

While the shift towards ideological flexibility around the SoBl invites advocates to choose between rationales for incorporation, the most prominent reasons advocating for the SoBl in media are that it: a) serves as an incentive for learning and teaching languages, and b) makes students competitive candidates in the global marketplace. In their critical policy analysis of the SoBl (2019), Subtirelu et al. came to a similar conclusion; using Valdez et al.'s (2016) framework of Equity/Heritage discourses and Global Human Capital discourses, they found that Global Human Capital discourses framing “language education efforts as a means to increase students’ marketability in an increasingly global economy” (p. 8) had a significant presence across SoBl policy and promotional texts. This rhetoric is reinforced through policy documents, news articles, and internal and external promotion by the SoBl website, as well as the various national language organizations supporting the Seal. For example, in a 2017 ACTFL conference presentation, Davin, Heineke, and Egnatz offer the following to address the question *Why the Seal?*: “It is both incentive and recognition; Language is not a college requirement, it is an enviable life skill; Language isn’t a ‘credit for graduation to check off,’ but a skill that ‘checks you in’ to future opportunity.” (Davin et al., 2017). The mention of recognition emphasizes the ability of bilingual proficiency to bring students professional and economic opportunities and connects the SoBl to economic incentives. Rather than just recognizing the language skills students already have, the SoBl functions discursively as a reminder for students to gain the language skills they should have. The incentive-heavy discourse of the SoBl is rooted in a long-running trend in world language education that ties language learning to neoliberal ideologies of economic mobility and global competitiveness (De Costa, Park & Wee, 2016; Kramsch, 2005; Ortega, 1999) The framing of world language learning as imparting necessary twenty-first century skills and competencies is thus not novel, but it is of note that

the SoBl appears to reinforce rather than disrupt this discourse. It is also of interest that the various documents describing the advantages of obtaining a SoBl continue to recycle a highly specific discourse around post-secondary opportunities in professional and higher educational domains. As seen in the following examples, reference is made repeatedly to employers and colleges or universities in defining what the SoBl does or can do:

The Seal of Biliteracy is... a statement of accomplishment for future employers and for college admissions. (FAQs, Seal of Biliteracy)<sup>3</sup>

A biliteracy seal on a high school diploma is visible evidence to students, parents, administrators, college admissions officials, and employers of the importance of learning languages. (State Advocacy Goals, ACTFL website)

Colleges and universities have started to recognize it. A survey of employers found that 66 percent of them would give preference to an applicant with that designation. (Matthews, *The Washington Post*, 2019)

The DPI says the acknowledgment would help employers or colleges identify which students are especially skilled in a second language. (Farr, *Minot News*, 2019)

It also may help colleges as they place students in courses, or provide future employers with an indicator of language skills, she [Françoise Valdenplas] said. (St. George, *The Washington Post*, 2017)

Within this discourse, there is not a clear consensus around whether these purported advantages are related to the initial process of getting hired or accepted, or to continued benefits during work or school (such as being able to exempt language coursework requirements at the university level). However, the circular nature and wide dissemination of such rhetoric between official sites, policy documents, and media implies that SoBl stakeholders at all levels of the onion believe such benefits exist.

## Findings

In assessing the implementational and ideological spaces of the SoBl, there are two findings that have implications for the overall impact of the SoBl on world language education in the United States.

### **Finding 1: The Purported Implementational Space of the SoBl Appears to Lag Behind the Ideological Discourse of Post-secondary Opportunities**

The repeated incentive discourse around the post-secondary utility of the SoBl naturally raises questions of whether there has been any uptake, or even awareness, of the SoBl in professional or higher education sectors. In various articles, there is often a vague reference to evidence showing that employers would value the SoBl distinction. One prominent source often cited is Gándara's (2014) *The Value*

<sup>3</sup> <https://sealofbiliteracy.org/faq/>

of *Bilingualism and the Seal of Bilingualism in the California Labor Market*. Gándara conducted a survey of employers across California, finding that employers across industries did value bilingualism in hiring new employees. Not only was this survey conducted exclusively with California employers, but the survey questions do not significantly distinguish between employers' preferences for bilingual *versus* monolingual employees and employers' preferences for employees holding the SoBl. Additionally, although employers did indicate a somewhat higher interest in employees that would have a SoBl, they only did so after having the SoBl thoroughly explained to them by the researchers conducting the survey.

While the survey was conducted from 2012 to 2013—a year after the SoBl was officially ratified through legislation in California—it does highlight several key concerns. Do students who achieve bilingual capabilities even need a SoBl certification for employers to find them attractive candidates? Are employers even aware of what the SoBl is, or does? What might be the attitudes of employers in other states towards the SoBl? Additionally, the survey only collects the self-reported attitudes of employers towards bilingual employees or SoBl holders, but does not contain any actual statistics verifying that the SoBl has been advantageous for holders in the employment sector. While it may be difficult to gauge a measure of the professional opportunities and advantages of the SoBl for students, it appears that there is currently limited research and evidence supporting the post-secondary ideological discourse, throwing the reach of the SoBl's implementational space into question. Gándara's 2014 research may serve as a starting point for investigating the SoBl's influence on the professional sector, but the ideological discourse of post-secondary opportunities has swept up and overextended these data.

As for colleges and universities, to date, no cited research supports claims that the SoBl policy has impacted the higher education domain. A search for the term SoBl on the websites of each of the top 50 national universities ranked by U.S. News and World Report (National University Rankings) revealed no mention of the SoBl in reference to admissions processes or world language requirements. It is impossible to conclude from this metric whether or not the SoBl has influenced university admissions and administrative processes—but the omission of any mention of the SoBl not only implies a lack of uptake, but also sends an implicit message to various stakeholders that the SoBl is not a valued asset in the higher educational domain. Another factor that may point to an absence of university investment is that there is a lack of explicit state-issued policies or incentives for universities to recognize the SoBl; several states (Illinois and Minnesota, namely) do offer scholarships or college credit at public universities for the SoBl, but the majority of states have no such provisions (Davin & Heineke, 2018).

There are several other potential barriers that present obstacles for SoBl implementation in a university context. The lack of standardization between states' versions of the SoBl, as previously discussed, means that there are significant differences in what possessing a SoBl means in terms of language proficiency or ability. This may likely restrict, or eliminate altogether, students' ability to apply their SoBl award at out-of-state universities. Additionally, the delayed start to world language education at the secondary level (as well as the frequent treatment of world language education as an elective) limits many students' pathways to the levels of proficiency required to obtain a SoBl by senior year (Davin & Heineke,

2018). Even those students who reach the proficiency benchmarks do not often have the opportunity to earn the SoBl until the end of their senior year, limiting the potential utility of the SoBl for college applications submitted earlier in the year. While advocates for the SoBl have promoted ideological neoliberal discourses around its post-secondary utility, it remains in flux whether the implementational space for the SoBl actually extends to employment and higher education domains.

### **Finding 2: The Implementational Space of the SoBl has the Potential to Bring Classroom Practices in Sync with Ideological Shifts in the Language Education Curriculum**

While the implementational space of the SoBl may not stretch past the K–12 educational setting, it seems to have a greater extension than expected within schools and classrooms, the actual sites where much world language education takes place. In their interviews with teachers in three districts in Illinois, that had implemented the SoBl, Davin, Heineke, and Egnatz (2018) found that the SoBl had actually changed teachers' instructional practices and modes of assessment. In the survey, 65% of the teachers indicated that the award had changed their instructional practices, with 46% indicating that they included more instruction focused on speaking and listening and 42% indicating that they included more instruction on reading and writing. Sixty-five percent of teachers reported a change to their assessment practices, with more than half of the respondents (54%) indicating that their assessment had become more proficiency-based and included a greater focus on interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational communication (Davin et al., 2018). Further references to pedagogical and curricular changes have been reported more informally elsewhere. For example, an article profiling the SoBl implementation in Connecticut's Fairfield Ludlowe High School mentioned how a longtime Spanish teacher was motivated to change her instructional practices: "Frankel, the Advanced Placement Spanish teacher at Ludlowe for more than 10 years, has refocused the curriculum to encourage students to use their Spanish skills to engage with others, regardless of small or minor errors" (Rocha, Fairfield Citizen, 2019).

Researchers of SoBl policies have rightfully critiqued the problematic overreliance of the SoBl award on language assessments, in part because they limit the accessibility of the SoBl award to learners of less commonly taught languages (Davin & Heineke, 2018; Subtirelu et al., 2019). Additionally, many researchers in applied linguistics have noted the failure of assessments to capture test takers' true communicative competencies. However, the fact that the SoBl has the potential to shift teacher practices is worthy of more attention; although world language assessments are regarded by many as inherently problematic, it is important to consider that these tests are more in line with well-rounded, communicative, and research-based approaches to teaching language proficiency—along with the World Readiness Standards—than a lot of current classroom practices may be. Although the intentions of stakeholders behind establishing SoBl policies may not have been to revise world language instruction as much as to expand it, such beginning research signals the SoBl's potential to enlarge implementational spaces for modern world language educational approaches further down the onion.



## Implications

These explorations of ideological and implementational spaces around the SoBl provide several important takeaways for stakeholders and advocates of both the SoBl and world language education more generally. Firstly, it appears that the primary focus of SoBl advocacy outreach and media has been around making various stakeholders in K–12 educational settings (states, districts, schools, parents, and students) aware that the SoBl exists. While such advocacy efforts are necessary for further interstate and intrastate implementation of the SoBl, there appear to be few advocacy efforts around making employers and universities aware of the SoBl. Rather than assuming that the SoBl will serve as an instrumental tool for post-secondary success, supporters of the SoBl may want to redirect their advocacy efforts towards professional and higher educational arenas, which appear to lack awareness of what the SoBl even signifies. Such advocacy may also work its way back into the K–12 implementational space, as districts and schools that have yet to incorporate the SoBl may be inspired by university or employer uptake. Advocates of the SoBl should also consider whether greater standardization of the SoBl requirements across states is possible, as research indicates that the range of requirements from state to state causes various issues around implementation and out-of-state utility—although it is questionable whether such standardization would actually be attainable or desirable.

Even if the SoBl fails to gain traction in post-secondary arenas, the burgeoning implementational space of the SoBl to affect teachers' instructional practices opens up another promising avenue for students to gain from the Seal. Local stakeholders, along with researchers in applied and educational linguistics, should further explore how the SoBl has impacted K–12 world language teaching and curriculum. The wide range of SoBl policies across states, the students working towards earning the Seal, and language teachers with different levels of tenure provide a rich source of data for researchers spanning methodologies and fields of study. National language organizations, like ACTFL, should also be very interested in whether the mobilization behind the SoBl inspires teachers to implement recommended practices for language education with increased fidelity. Furthermore, the discourses surrounding world language education may shift and evolve in correlation with improved attention to language instruction for students. While the data may be preliminary thus far, such a finding points to the implications of the SoBl initiative, regardless of how many individual students obtain or utilize an award, to impact world language education significantly down the line.

A final, but important, point of note is that the overarching universally positive discourse, along with the SoBl's heavy reliance on validated language assessments to rate proficiency, continues to privilege certain world languages above others—in particular, those traditionally taught in American schools and associated with Western European lineage—French, Spanish, German, etc. (Heineke et al., 2018). At the local level, stakeholders who are responsible for the design and implementation of SoBl policies should think about how to provide districts with explicit support for awarding the SoBl to speakers of any language, even those without assessments. At the macro level, national organizations that continue to promote the SoBl and multilingualism should

prioritize the promotion of a critical framing of world language education that challenges longstanding beliefs around which languages should be taught, tested, and seen as useful in a twenty-first century world. The SoBl's unprecedented spread as a language education policy presents a hopeful opportunity within the educational sphere for contesting and expanding traditional narratives around multilingualism—but, without due effort by stakeholders to shift circulating discourses, it will continue to perpetuate inequities for linguistically marginalized students as Subtirelu et al. (2019) show in their critical policy analysis of the SoBl. The implementational and ideological spaces for world language education should not come, and do not need to come, at the expense of those spaces for bilingual education.

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