


Chapter 4


Exploring the Role of Bilingual AAC in Promoting Language Equity in Inclusive Multilingual Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

The exclusion of bilingual Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) from mainstream assistive technology and education policy is a systemic failure that reinforces linguistic inequities for emergent bilinguals with complex communication needs. Research indicates that bilingual AAC supports language development, reinforces self-identity, and increases caregiver involvement; yet it remains largely

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-1752-6.ch004

overlooked, insufficiently funded, and frequently misunderstood (Mitchell & Baker, 2024). The persistence of monolingual biases in AAC design, funding policies, and professional training forces bilingual users into restrictive systems that erase their linguistic and cultural identities (Dulay, 2022). This chapter argues that the failure to implement bilingual AAC is a deliberate policy choice that denies bilingual AAC users' full participation in their communities. It critically examines how misconceptions among clinicians, lack of research investment, and bureaucratic funding barriers sustain an exclusionary system (Ward et al., 2023).

INTRODUCTION

Inclusion is measured by physical presence, not communicative access. For emergent bilinguals with complex communication needs (CCN), being in the classroom is no guarantee of being heard. When their AAC systems reflect only the dominant language, their identities, relationships, and expressive power are invisible. The principle of inclusive education asserts that students, regardless of cognitive, linguistic, or communicative profile, deserve equitable access to learning. However, in practice, inclusion collapses into Artiles's (2011) symbolic integration, a superficial presence without meaningful participation. For bilingual AAC users, this superficiality is compounded by systemic barriers that restrict access to communication systems, bilingual Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) technologies, which include speech-generating devices and symbol-based tools designed to support non-verbal or minimally verbal individuals, in ways that reflect their linguistic realities. These students are underserved and are structurally excluded from communicative citizenship (Grosjean, 2024), silenced by technocratic models of assistive technology that prioritize standardization over linguistic equity.

Bilingual AAC systems enable students with CCN to participate in academic, social, and familial life across multiple languages. Yet their implementation remains fragmented, underfunded, and marginalized within educational policy and pedagogical practice. Research shows that communication in a student's home or dominant language supports identity formation, parent-child bonding, and academic achievement (García & Wei, 2023; Mitchell & Baker, 2024). However, schools tend to default to monolingual, English-centric AAC models, resulting in Bourdieu's (1991) symbolic violence, the institutional imposition of dominant linguistic norms that delegitimize minoritized ways of speaking and knowing. Furthermore, this structural neglect leads to Spivak's (1988) epistemic violence, the silencing of subaltern voices through the denial of linguistic legitimacy. Cummins's (2021) subtractive bilingualism, wherein minority languages are framed as barriers, is entailed in policy and practice. AAC, when designed with a monolingual orientation,

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