

EXPOSURE



LESSONS OF LANGUAGE

Celebrating bilingualism: A teacher's passion for belonging

Story by [Fresno State](#)

December 16th, 2021

"In Mexico they would tell me one thing, in the United States I would hear another. And I was just like, 'I'm not even from here or there. I'm right in between,'" says Veronica Solorio.

Veronica was born in Michoacan, Mexico, and growing up, she never stayed in one place for long. Her parents worked in agriculture and would constantly migrate to the United States, towing Veronica and her six siblings back and forth in their beloved family van.

As a migrant, Spanish-speaking student, Veronica struggled with her elementary education and the English-only curriculum. She constantly felt pressured to choose a single identity.

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Mexican or American — and often endured hurtful remarks from both her peers and her teachers.

“As a child, I did go through a lot of racism,” she says. “A lot of my teachers used to make fun of or comment on the types of things I would take to school even my clothing or my lunch.”

Now, as a first-year, bilingual kindergarten teacher at George Washington Elementary in Madera Unified, Veronica is making a difference in the lives of her own students — many of whom experience the same social, economic, and linguistic struggles she faced as a child.

“A lot of times I see students, and I see myself in them too,” she says. “I get the opportunity to teach bilingual students, and I get to embrace the language and teach them to feel empowered,” she says.

Lessons of language



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EDUCATIONAL EMPOWERMENT

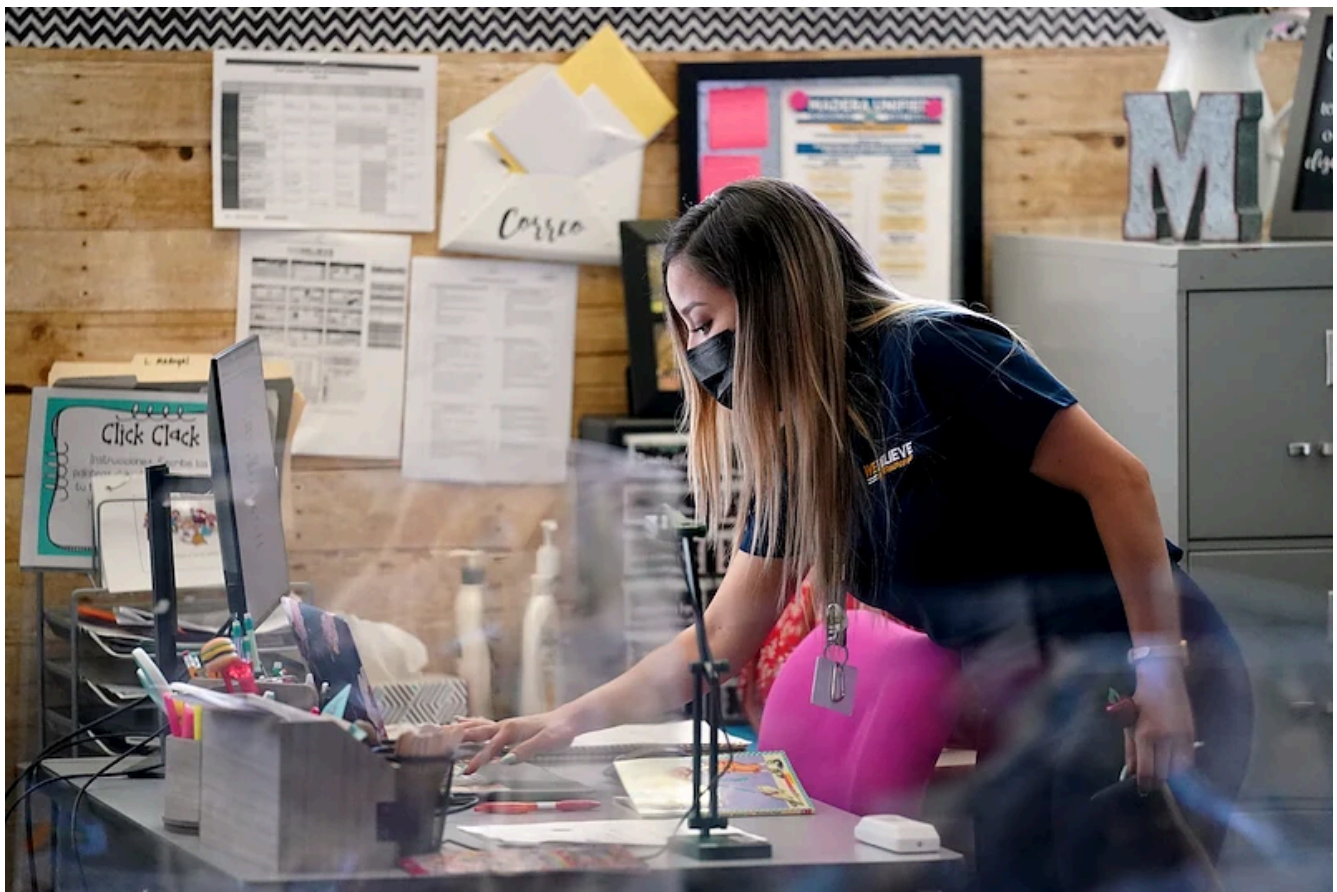
Veronica graduated from the Kremen School of Education and Human Development in 2018 with her bachelor's in liberal studies and again in 2021 with a multiple subject teaching credential and a bilingual authorization in Spanish. As a Fresno State student, Veronica was part of the inaugural cohort for the Madera residency program, which prepares students to teach in dual language immersion (DLI) elementary school classrooms throughout Madera Unified.

"I met the teachers, and it was an instant click," she says. "It was just sort of the feeling of this is where I belonged because you get to hear them also speaking your language."

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→Did you know? The Kremen School of Education and Human Development's bilingual authorization program offers courses in Spanish and Hmong, preparing the next generation of teachers to support linguistically and culturally diverse students.



Teacher residency programs provide intensive preservice preparation, partnering students with in-service teachers and placing them in classrooms throughout the region. These programs also guarantee students employment upon graduation and are designed to train teachers to respond to a district's unique needs.

In Madera, a majority of students are exposed to the Spanish language at home, making the residency program's focus on biliteracy all the more impactful.

"Dual language is the idea that our students will become biliterate and bilingual in Spanish but also develop a worldview, a multicultural view, achieve academic success in both languages and be prepared for the real world," says Adalberto Hernandez, principal of George Washington Elementary.

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→Did you know? Dual language is the only model that closes the academic achievement gap between English language learners and native English-speakers (Collier & Thomas, 2017).



Through her own experiences and the knowledge she gained at Fresno State, Veronica has learned the importance of representation and belonging. In turn, she teaches her students to celebrate the bridge between language and culture and the inherent value of their own unique identities.

“I want them to understand diversity and to embrace it,” she says. “I hope that my students understand the importance of being kind, the importance of love and the importance of respect.”

Veronica also knows that bilingualism has become increasingly valuable in today’s job market and aims to prepare her students for a diverse and complex world.

“Society is growing. Everything is moving — technology — everything's changing,” she says. “And being bilingual now is celebrated, whereas before it wasn't.”

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A LASTING IMPACT

As an administrator, Adalberto sees the impact passionate and dedicated teachers like Veronica can have on students, especially on those who experience a number of social and economic challenges.

“When teachers are so passionate to work with students from these communities, it really does give you that sense of pride and hope that we’re bringing the right educators who have that heart, that drive, to do what it takes for our students,” he says.

Veronica is dedicated to her work and knows that the sense of belonging DLI programs provide is crucial for both the success of her students and the future vitality of our communities.

“We need to understand that the world is changing, and our communication needs to change too,” she says. “And that’s what we’re doing through the DLI program.”

As DLI programs continue to grow throughout the Valley, state and nation, teachers like Veronica will have a lasting impact on countless students and reach beyond the classroom to create meaningful change across generations.

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“The biggest thing I think this program is going to do is change the perspective of adults,” she says. “Programs like this celebrate your culture, your diversity and inspire you to be able to acknowledge each other even more, and when we see these changes happen in our own kids, it really motivates adults to make those changes too.”



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Collier, V. P., & Thomas, W. P. (2017). Validating the power of bilingual schooling: Thirty-two years of large-scale, longitudinal research. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 37, 203–217. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190517000034>

Footnote: *Photos by Cary Edmondson, Story by Victoria Cisneros, Video by Chris Samaro—
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