What Every Educator Needs to Know

Lily Wong Fillmore, Professor of Education at the University of California, Berkeley, noted that there is currently a widespread ignorance in the Nation's education system of language and its impact on learning. Fillmore said that there is virtually no attention paid in schools of education to the importance of language on a child's educational success.

The Nation's schools, she stated, do a good job educating children who come from mainstream backgrounds. On the other hand, they do a poor job educating children "who come from low income, ethnic minority and immigrant families, especially if they speak languages or varieties of English other than the standard one spoken by the mainstream." Further, Fillmore exclaimed that "we do an especially poor job with some groups — Latinos, African-Americans, and Native Americans."

Given the problems our schools have had in the teaching of English language and literacy, a great many children are in special education although their learning problems stem from inadequate instruction rather than from a real learning disability. This leads Fillmore to observe that teachers are not being prepared to deal with linguistic diversity in the classroom. Students, therefore, are suffering from teachers' inability to discern language differences from language problems.

Teachers who don't have proper linguistic knowledge often have misconceptions of children who do not speak standard English: "they are unprepared for school; their parents have neglected them; or there is something wrong with them" (that they are learning disabled). She concluded by asking: What do teachers need to know about language to teach in a diverse society? A lot more than they presently do, she answered.