



3 Strategies to Honor Students' Language Assets



About Ellevation

Ellevation Education has been a leader in English Learner education since 2011. Over the past 11 years, Ellevation has had the opportunity to serve over 1,100 partner districts and over 3 million current and former ELs across the U.S. Our products were built by a team of administrators, teachers, and technology experts with input from top language acquisition and math experts.

Ellevation Education is dedicated to helping ELs achieve their highest aspirations. We are inspired every day by the extraordinary contributions EL students make in school and society, often in the face of significant obstacles. All multilingual students bring important assets to their learning experiences.

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3 Strategies to Honor Students' Language Assets

Introduction

Multilingual learners come to school with diverse language repertoires that evolve rapidly and are often used interchangeably. This can be challenging for well-intentioned educators who may be tempted (or even trained) to focus primarily on English language acquisition - often at the expense of maintaining students' home languages. Given the challenges multilingual learners face in school, this focus on English may seem appropriate. But research shows that when multilingual students are given the opportunity to leverage their home language at school, they often surpass their monolingual peers over time. In fact, bilingual education programs for multilingual learners outperform those in English-only programs on tests of academic achievement (Krashen, Rolstad, & MacSwan, 2007).

Fortunately, a focus on learning the academic language necessary for all students to thrive does not have to come at the expense of multilingual learners' home language and culture, both of which are fundamental components of their identities as people and as learners. When we show our students that we value the language and culture they bring with them to school, they show up at school and they learn - regardless of what program they are enrolled in (Dee & Penner, 2016).

This paper proposes three strategies educators can use to affirm and capitalize on students' linguistic assets and leverage them to unleash academic success:



Implement Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy



Build Students' Academic Language



Provide Opportunities for Discourse

"We are all wired for using language to create, build, and share ideas."

-Zweirs, 2019

The Value of Incorporating Home Language in School

A growing body of research shows that in order to help students achieve their highest aspirations, we must not only understand the value of learning English, but also the languages they bring with them. Meta-analyses have shown that intentionally incorporating home language into lesson planning and curriculum design results in academic success that is aligned with - and sometimes exceeds - that of English-speaking peers (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2014).

This means that educators should be encouraged to allow students to use their entire language repertoires. They must also be equipped with strategies that allow students to do so while learning the academic language necessary to access grade-level content and demonstrate mastery of standards. Fortunately, this is already happening in schools with a wide range of instructional models, from dual language to English-only.

Benefits of Dual Language Programs



Multilingual Learners in dual language programs outperform students in English-only programs



When schools value students' language and culture, they show up to school and learn



Multilingual Learners in dual language programs show linguistic and emotional growth

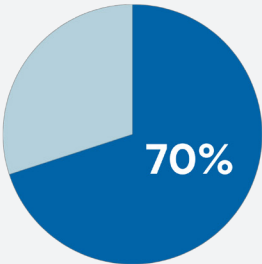
Dual Language vs. English-Only

The gold standard for supporting home languages while simultaneously learning English is a well-designed dual-language program. When deployed effectively, these programs offer students the opportunity to learn content in English and in another language - in many cases, their home language. Dual language programs are intentionally designed to make language and content interdependent and symbiotic. They offer built-in accountability by designating the amount of time students are instructed in each language. Perhaps most importantly, they are staffed by teachers who have received training that enables them to strategically leverage both languages to build content knowledge, and to build upon each other.

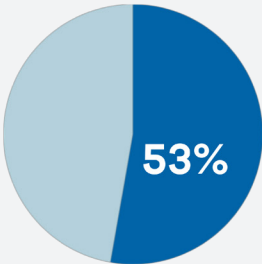
For multilingual learners, studies show that participation in these programs results not only in improved academic outcomes (Valentino & Reardon, 2014), but also bolsters linguistic and emotional growth (Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2001). Additionally, dual language programs provide “opportunities for all students to gain valuable multilingual and cross-cultural skills that prepare them to thrive in today’s global world.” (Kennedy & Medina, 2017)

However, the majority of students in the US, including those classified as English learners, are enrolled in English-only programs. This means that there is no built-in accountability for the school or district to follow around what percentage of time students spend with English vs. other languages. There are typically fewer bilingual teachers and content teachers who are trained to work with multilingual learners. In most cases, time spent using home language is determined by students themselves and is commonly relegated to social interactions in hallways, cafeterias, and other places where students can interact freely.

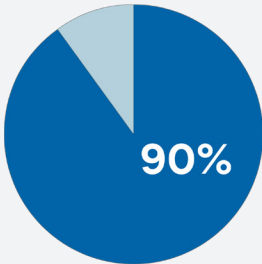
The Bilingual Teacher Shortage



70% of educators say their districts do not have enough bilingual teachers



53% of educators say their districts do not have PD to develop the capacity of teachers working with multilingual learners



90% of educators say their districts have been impacted by the national bilingual teacher shortage

Source: 2022 Ellevation Education Survey of 1,136 K-12 EL Educators

Fortunately, it is becoming more common for educators in English-only environments to use instructional techniques that support learning in multiple languages and build *on* versus *over* their language repertoires. However, many teachers in these programs lack the experience, training, and resources necessary to effectively serve multilingual learners. Given these challenges, how can we ensure multilingual learners’ home language and academic language needs are met, regardless of what program they are enrolled in?

In the next section, we highlight three strategies that are effective in any instructional model and benefit all students.



1. Implement Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

When given opportunities to connect with their identities, students tend to perform better. Research has shown that a positive ethnic-racial identity is linked to academic achievement and persistence (Rivas-Drake, et al., 2014). Designing a curriculum from a culturally sustaining lens can go a long way in equipping teachers with the tools and strategies they need to best support all students. It is important to note that this topic is broad and is addressed extensively in the literature. Our intent here is to highlight two systematic ways school districts can ensure their students have opportunities to deepen their appreciation for the languages and cultures they bring with them.

There are many approaches schools and districts can take to empower students' languages, cultures, and identities. Making intentional decisions to include ethnic studies in the curriculum has proven successful in many places. Ethnic studies [can be defined as](#) “the teaching of histories, cultures, and intellectual traditions of people of color in the United States to promote social transformation.” A [study on the effect of implementing ethnic studies courses](#) found that the students enrolled had a substantially higher probability of graduating from high school, increased engagement including enrollment and attendance, and improved grades (Dee & Penner, 2016).

There are also many opportunities to implement programs that have already been designed and implemented successfully by experts in the field. The Seal of Biliteracy is a great example of a program that can help students, schools, and communities gain more appreciation for students' home languages. [The Seal of Biliteracy](#) 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. Many districts offer checkpoints and pathways for students starting as early as elementary school all the way to graduation. This not only keeps students on track but also encourages them to appreciate the value of their entire language repertoires. The flexibility of the program allows for schools and districts to choose how they want to implement it in a way that best suits their needs.

Offerings like these also showcase the home language of those students who are learning English, thereby elevating their academic standing and boosting their confidence as they move on to higher education or the workforce. Just as importantly, they have the potential to help the broader community to see our multilingual learners as assets to their schools and organizations.



Students enrolled in ethnic studies courses have a higher probability of graduating from high school.



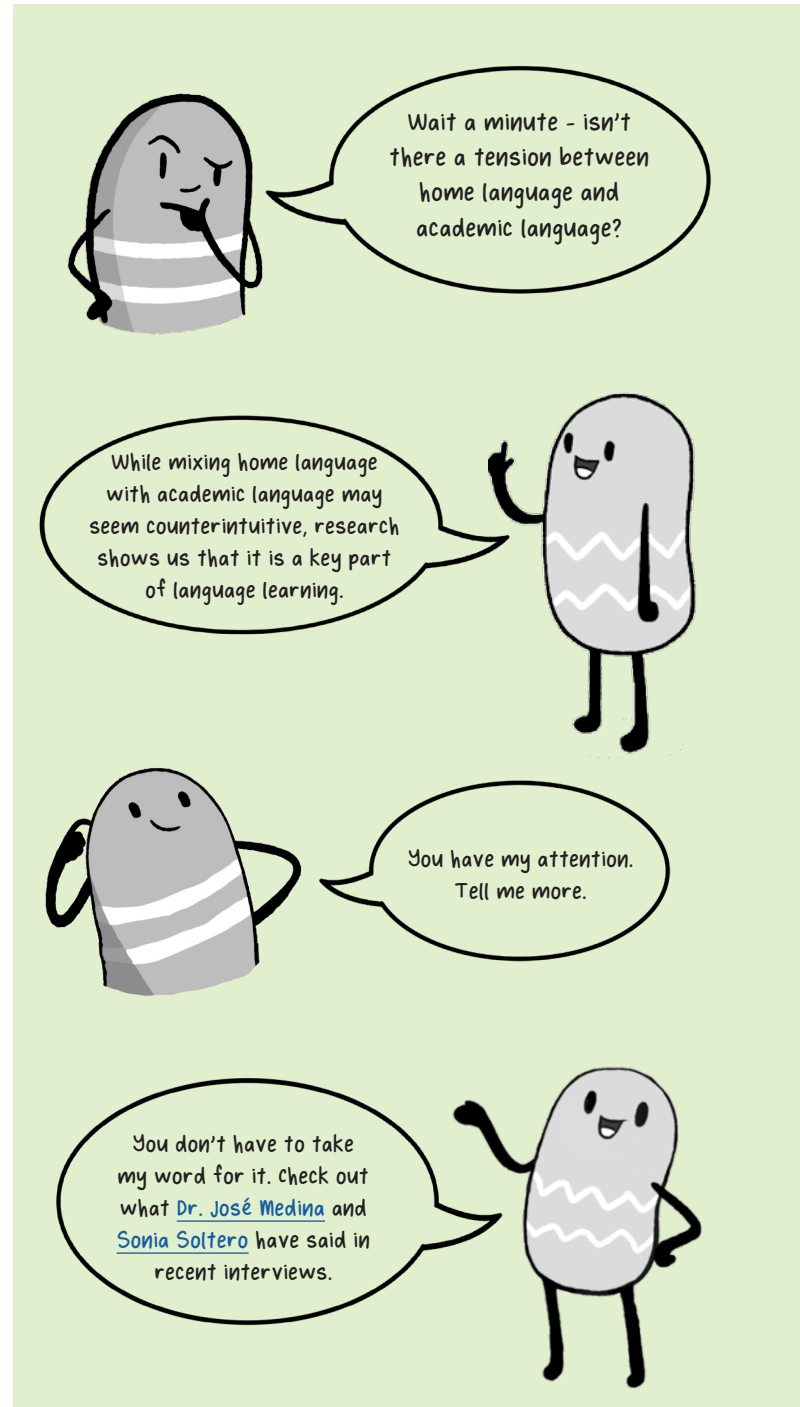
The Seal of Biliteracy can help students, schools, and communities gain more appreciation for students' home languages.



2. Build Students' Academic Language

Whether they are multilingual learners or monolingual English speakers, all students have diverse language repertoires that they use to navigate distinct aspects of their lives - all of which must be valued. For multilingual learners, this means part of that repertoire is a home language, which many of their educators may not be familiar with. When attempting to teach academic language, it is helpful to remember that encouraging students to use all their language and communication skills (including drawing, visualizing, non-verbal cues, etc.) will not dilute their ability to learn a new language. In fact, it will help them create meaningful connections between language and content which will ultimately lead to improved outcomes (Mandriñan, 2014).

To understand academic language, we must also understand social language, sometimes referred to as the language of the “halls and malls.” It’s the way we talk to known audiences with whom we share a high degree of informality. Social language often includes simple terms and syntax. In contrast, academic language is less frequently encountered and often includes more obscure words and complex syntax and text structures used to achieve a specific academic purpose. Academic language instruction therefore requires more time and intentional focus in the context of school.



We use language to navigate meaning and form ideas. Whether it's through speaking, reading, listening, or writing, language permeates every aspect of teaching in every grade and subject. As students build a more robust academic linguistic repertoire, they will more effectively interpret the ideas of others (peers and teachers), find nuance, synthesize their own explanations and arguments, and develop messages to convey all this through discourse. Students who do not have the academic language to engage in these activities will struggle to engage in rich cognitive experiences that rely on language understanding and expression. For many students, a viable entry point to gaining academic language is leveraging their home language. By doing so, we encourage them to make meaningful connections that have been proven to improve academic, emotional, and cognitive outcomes.

"Academic language is a second language for all students"

-Short and Echevarria, 2016





3. Provide Opportunities for Discourse

Thoughtfully structured classroom discourse can include a mix of social language, academic language, and home languages. As noted earlier, social and academic language are powerful tools in discourse. Translanguaging (using a person's full linguistic repertoire to construct meaning, including using more than one language) has also been clearly shown to support language and content learning (García et al., 2017). Leveraging a mix of language, including academic language, in discourse is the payoff for all of the instructional work noted above. It enables students to go beyond basic understanding to forge new ideas and make connections that are unique and meaningful to them.

Classrooms in which students are engaged in authentic communication to create, build, and share ideas create durable and impactful learning outcomes. In his meta-analysis of over 50,000 studies looking at factors impacting outcomes across grades, ages, and countries, John Hattie found a large effect size for classroom discussion (Hattie, 2010). Research shows that conceptual understanding of deep, rich ideas in mathematics is built through discourse (NCTM, 2014). The Next Generation Science Standards codifies the importance of explanations and arguments as key learning targets (NRC, 2011). And discussion is also reinforced in national governing bodies for English and Social Studies (National Council of Social Studies, 2010).

Designing and delivering rich, authentic learning experiences that enable students to engage deeply with content is an enormous challenge. By gaining access to - and building ownership of - rich discourse, students apply recently-learned language and skills, increase confidence, and connect their ideas to the language needed to express them. Being able to leverage academic language at the word, sentence, and discourse level helps students engage in academic conversations and communicate more purposefully, especially at higher levels where precision, procedure, and argument become more important.

Conclusion

While there are many programmatic choices school districts can make to support language and content growth, there are strategies that can be implemented in any environment. Regardless of program type, we must find ways to leverage students' complete language repertoires to unlock their true potential. Like the avid traveler who considers themselves a citizen of the world, we can help equip students with the skills and confidence they need to become the multilingual leaders of the future. The magic happens when students understand, appreciate, and own their languages and identities.

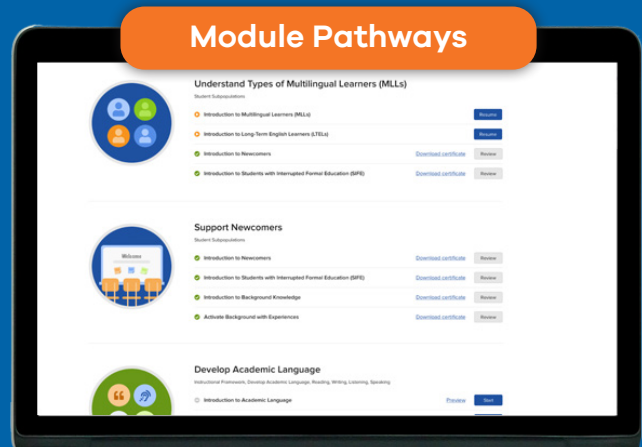
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