

## Supporting Multilingual Students with Universal Design: Four Practices I Wish My Teachers Had Incorporated in the Classroom

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*Summary: This article expands on the profound educational experiences to be had for all students through an equitable and universal design for learning (UDL) of multilingual students. This reassures these students, who tend to be BIPOC, that their “other” language is a strength and gives native English speaking students the opportunity to learn new languages and bond with their classmates through similarities outside of language, removing language barriers and stigma.*

*Keywords: ESL, multilinguals, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), UDL (Universal Design for Learning), ESSA (Every Student Success Act), IEPs (Individualized Education Plans), microaggression*

### Introduction

To call myself an immigrant, given my status as a U.S. citizen, would be tone-deaf, given the vast discrimination and hardships actual immigrants face in this country, not to mention the tumultuous journey to even make it to the U.S. in the first place. Regardless of my legal status, I am defined by the experiences of my immigrant mother all the same. My upbringing in a non-English speaking household led to Haitian-Creole being my first language. *This greatly impacted how I viewed the world, those around me, and the classes I was in.* That last sentence, in Haitian-Creole: *Sa a nan vire anpil enpak sou fason mwen te wè mond lan, moun ki bò kote m’, ak klas mwen te nan yo.*

I was enrolled in ESL classes in elementary school, given Haitian-Creole dictionaries during exams if I was

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lucky, and prohibited from speaking in my mother tongue. Writing a sentence, as I did above, was an act of defiance. If English is your first language, imagine entering a learning environment where your English was taken away, devalued, as if the language of your heart is something that you can disconnect from.

These exclusionary practices that teachers

used, in the name of “helping” me learn English, created barriers and impacted how I socially interacted with my classmates and instructionally interacted with my teachers. My journey of learning English speaks to the importance of incorporating Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in every classroom. UDL provides a culture of dignity and belonging and creates a humane environment for learning.

UDL is an educational framework based on decades of neuroscience research and is endorsed by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This framework is being adopted by teachers, schools, and districts around the globe and is an evidence-based practice for teaching all students in an inclusive learning environment. UDL empowers both teachers and students by honoring student identity, providing necessary support, and putting students in charge of their learning.

Reflecting on my school system’s lackluster practices for multilingual students and newfound knowledge and research on UDL, there are four practices that teachers need to incorporate into their classrooms.

### Translanguaging: Incorporating Student’s Native Languages

Translanguaging is using and honoring a multilingual person’s full linguistic repertoire—simply, encouraging the use of a student’s first language in class. Dr. Ofelia García, a professor of Urban Education and of Latin American, Iberian, and Latino Cultures (LAILAC) at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, states that multilingual students should have opportunities to use their entire language repertoire in the classroom.

In third grade, my teacher, Mrs. Knox, acknowledged student birthdays each week. In October, three of us celebrated our birthdays. Mrs. Knox asked me to teach the class how to sing Happy Birthday in Haitian-Creole, while a classmate of mine taught us to sing in Spanish, and another in Cape-Verdean Creole. Sharing our languages made us feel included, but it also highlighted the similarity in syntax and word choice amongst our three languages. Embracing multilingual classrooms actually builds language.

For example, in a history class, a teacher may ask English learners to write a response using a combination of English and their native language. Not only does this offer an opportunity for students to engage with multiple languages in the classroom, but it also places a level of inclusivity previously closed off to English learners, who, like me, were made to feel that their first language was a deficit instead of an asset. As Professor Garcia shares, “Being able to perform with language-specific features legitimized in schools is not the same as having general language ability or being knowledgeable of content” (Grosjean, 2016).

### Provide Linguistic Scaffolds

Accommodating English learners is essential to ensuring students are keeping up with their work relative to their native English-speaking classmates. These accommodations do not differ from the strategies all teachers regularly employ for any and all students who are struggling. Some examples of linguistic accommodations include visuals, graphic organizers, translations, and sentence stems and frames for expression and reflection. Though many of these accommodations are mandated through IEPs (Individual Education Plans), students learning English may not have access to the same support. These strategies benefit all students when it comes to essay/outline structure, transition sentences, and evidence-based statements; since this is not a new strategy, no extra or new work must be undertaken. Providing helpful strategies to better understand the teacher’s curriculum will not only benefit one student, or one kind of student, it will inadvertently benefit everywhere.

Sentence frames provide a framework for English-language learners to communicate in both oral and written language, and they also aid in the development of students’ self-efficacy. Students feel a part of the classroom community when they have the vocabulary to participate in classroom discussions and debates and can communicate their opinions on paper. Note the examples below:

### Explanation

- One reason \_\_\_\_\_ may occur is because \_\_\_\_\_.
- Another reason \_\_\_\_\_ may occur is because \_\_\_\_\_.
- At first I thought \_\_\_\_\_ but now I think \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.
- I like how the author uses \_\_\_\_\_ to show \_\_\_\_\_.

It is critical to ensure that multilingual students have the scaffolds and support they need to access and use English as an additional language while honoring their first language.

### Collaborative Summaries

Collaborative Summarizing is an exercise to foster collaboration and community while building comprehension. A collaborative summary begins with teacher modeling—sharing multiple examples of effective summaries, sentence frames to craft summaries, and opportunities for

students to practice. In a gradual release of responsibility, students read or listen to high-quality resources and craft a summary using provided linguistic scaffolds.

Students then pair up to create a mutually agreed-upon summary. (Consider pairing up students by their first language!) Each couple then meets with another pair. They re-negotiate a shared summary for their new four-person group. This process repeats with groups

of four collaborating. Lastly, students will review the summaries and can independently respond to questions about the text. This “snowball effect” provides opportunities for students to work with multiple diverse partners, continually review grade-level materials, and work together to create accurate summaries of contents under study.

### Cultivating Cultural Responsiveness

I cannot stress enough how important it is for teachers to build meaningful relationships with English language learners to help them feel that they belong, that their cultural capital and languages are an asset, and that the classroom was built for and with them.

The effort to discover the essentials of a child’s origins—specifically, not “somewhere in the Middle East/South America/Asia/Africa”—shows the pupil that you value them enough to inquire. Consider a student who has recently relocated from Nigeria, an African country. Taking the time to learn the name of the language the student speaks by name, Yoruba (rather than referring to it as an

African language), develops a bond between the educator and the learner that will lead to effective English learning in the future. Taking this time shows a student that you want to know them personally, not merely as a member of a cultural group. Not taking the time to correctly identify a child's country of origin, and that country's respective language, much like not bothering to pronounce their name correctly, is a kind of microaggression, a small, subtle insult. Take the extra step to show you care about your student's cultural identity and all that comes with it.

One of the earliest instances where I recalled my teacher creating a culturally responsive learning environment is during the non-academic lunch period. I had forgotten my lunch at home and my mother dropped it off during lunchtime and we communicated in Haitian-Creole. When assumed by a passing administrator that we were speaking French, a common misconception by those who hear the Haitian language, my first-grade teacher Mrs. Bockbrader respectfully corrected him and explained that it sounded like French due to Haiti's colonial past at the hands of the European power. At the moment as a first-grader, I didn't understand "colonial" or what it meant to build a culturally responsive classroom. Although, the fact that the moment has stuck with me to this day shows how important it was that she celebrated my identity.

I would have liked it if all my teachers committed to universally designed, culturally responsive practice in every class, every day—not only to honor me and my family but to help me to learn and acquire an additional language. My time spent working with students as a teaching assistant for Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary in Providence, RI and 4+ years working as an academic enrichment tutor to Black and Brown immigrant kids in Boston, MA at the first national black tennis camp in the country, has highlighted the importance of these strategies. Working with these students before, during, and after school I was able to see how the strategies that were lacking affected other aspects of these children's personalities. I plan to continue to lead this charge within my own role doing research and policy for Novak Educational Consulting. Focusing on things such as language obstacles, culturally responsive teaching, and a variety of other topics that I believe intertwine, I am able to provide an additional perspective to readers of our created content, and hopefully that sparks a meaningful change in the classroom. *Please take the time to learn about, and incorporate, these four practices in your classroom.* Or, as I would say in Haitian Creole: *Tanpri pran tan pou w aprann sou, epi enkòpore, kat pratik sa yo nan salklas ou a.*

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