

## An educator's reflection on asset-based language following the WAESOL conference

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*Summary: This is a reflection on the keynote speech by Dr. Denise Furlong at the WAESOL Conference in 2023, with a focus on shifting towards more asset-based language in our field. The author also presents the case for a new asset-based term to replace a deficit-based term commonly used when describing language learners.*

*Keywords: WAESOL, asset-based language, linguistic isolation*

Since my introduction into the English language learning field in 2002, I have seen various terms be introduced, widely used, and go out of use. For instance, when I began teaching English language, *ESL*, *EFL*, and *TESL* were widely used. We talked about students and teachers. When I completed my master's degree in the field a decade later, *ESOL* and *TESOL* were most popular. At that time, we talked about learners and teachers/facilitators. And just over a decade later, this year's WAESOL conference featured a key-note speech where the terms *Multilingual Learner (ML)* and *Multilingual Language Learner (MLL)* were widespread.

The 2023 WAESOL Conference featured a key-note speech by Dr. Denise Furlong. In her speech, Dr. Furlong made the case for asset-based language in our field. Certain terms were more familiar to me, such as *ML/MLL*. It was my first time learning the term *Learners with Educational Differences (LED)*. Personally, I am relieved to have an alternative to the deficit-based *SLIFE/SIFE* terms which describe students with an interrupted and/or limited formal education. When I document information about a learner, I like to carefully consider the terms that I am using to describe the learner. If the terms are widely understood to other educators but could be construed as negative or critical to the learners themselves, I feel strongly that I should reconsider how I document that information. Even if a term is the "industry standard", its impact can be detrimental and far-reaching.

In the spirit of reflection, I would like to address a particular term which is widely used in English language programs and beyond. The term in question is "linguistic isolation". National and state governments collect data on individuals who are "linguistically isolated", and the presence of "linguistic isolation" has been linked in research to various negative outcomes, including higher mortality and lower socio-economic status. [A 2019 report from the Oregon Health Authority](#) defines the term as follows: "A linguistically-isolated household

is one in which no member at or above 14 years old speaks English proficiently." The history of this term is described in [Drake's 2014 article](#) as follows: "The term linguistic isolation originated in the 1980 U.S. Census in response to the growing need to communicate with individuals who were being supported by legislation..." (Siegel, Martin, & Bruno, 2001, p. 2-3).

In summary, the original use of "linguistic isolation" was in reference to the individuals who were harder to communicate with in English during government data collection, and the term is still in use in recent years.

"Linguistic isolation" is a term which has always been problematic for me as an educator in our field, and I would like to



The cover of the WAESOL Conference program October 2023

illustrate why this term is problematic in three ways. First, learners are often described by their instructors as “linguistically isolated” when they speak their native language at home and their English proficiency is in the beginner/intermediate range. The term holds negative connotations because it implies that the choice to speak one’s native language at home with family members is an impediment to more advanced English proficiency.

Second, the use of the word “isolation” indicates a lack of participation and involvement in a surrounding community. This implies that the community is English-speaking. However, this is often not the case for learners. They may have extended family, friends, neighbors, business owners, instructors, doctors, and others in their surrounding community who also share proficiency in the learner’s native language and use that language in interactions with the learner.

Third, instructors often encourage their “linguistically-isolated” learners to practice more English at home with their family in order to meet their English language goals. This encouragement may be well-intended, but it is often undesirable, impractical, and counter-productive for learners to use English in their daily home life. I have worked with countless adult learners who are told by their instructors to speak more English at home, but there are many reasons why the family continues to use their native language at home. For instance, many of my adult learners have school-age children who insist that the family use their native language exclusively at

home because that is a core part of their identity.

Essentially, the term “linguistic isolation” is deficit-based. In [MacSwan’s 2020 article](#), the author identifies the need for an asset-based approach regarding ML’s home language use: “Rather than seeing children’s home language as a deficit, asset-based pedagogies see it as a critical resource to be affirmed, valued, and fully utilized as part of a child’s school-based learning experience” (p. 28).

In this vein, I would like to propose an asset-based term which conveys the positive action of choosing to speak a language at home. With this choice, an individual is keeping a vital lifeline to a culture, identity, and history. In place of “linguistic isolation”, I propose the terms “linguistic conservation” and “linguistically conserved”. I believe that these terms are asset-based and empowering.

The continuous shift towards asset-based language can be challenging, and there are certainly times when it is not possible to adopt the new terms quickly. However, as educators in our field, we can appreciate the unique power and adaptability of the English language. The terms may change, and our field is always moving towards more inclusive, asset-based language. In the spirit of Dr. Furlong’s keynote speech, I hope that educators in our field will consider retiring the term “linguistic isolation” and adopting the asset-based term “linguistic conservation” to describe an incredibly powerful action to conserve the use of one’s language at home.

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## CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Beven, L. (2024). An educator’s reflection on asset-based language following the WAESOL conference. *WAESOL Educator*, 49(1), 27-28.

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