

A Culturally Relevant, Multimodal, and Social Literacy Curriculum for MLLs

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Summary: A bilingual educator reflects on their journey from feeling marginalized for their diverse cultural identities and skills to embracing them as assets. They advocate for inclusive literacy curricula, emphasizing cultural relevance, multimodal tools, and social interaction. Through research and teaching experience, they highlight strategies to support multilingual learners, fostering equity and empowerment.

Keywords: multilingual learners, diversity, literacy development, digital literacy, multimodal tools, cultural relevance, social interaction

As a bilingual and bicultural individual, I often had experiences where I felt my Spanish and diversity was looked at as a deficit—a flaw and barrier that affected my education. I attended a private school, with no more than 250 students; the majority of my school community was monolingual, white students and teachers. When I first entered school, I only spoke Spanish at home to communicate with my parents. I found myself stuck in between two cultures and feeling as though one language was not appropriate in certain areas in my life. As I continued to spend years in a dominant English language classroom, I felt as though I unconsciously hid my bilingual skills to fit into the norm. I was never given the opportunity to use my Spanish skills in any school, unless it was for the 40 minutes of Spanish class that was taught by our white teacher, whose first language was English, second language was French, and third language was nonfluent Spanish.

Once I got into college, I finally felt like I did not have to choose an identity or culture—I was bilingual and bicultural; it was my asset. I learned how creating an equitable education for our students and providing our multilingual, diverse learners with opportunities was crucial to their success. Now, as I am obtaining completing Western Washington University's Digital Media and Literacy Certificate, I wonder how we, as educators, can integrate technology and other multimodal tools to help maintain students' home language and develop new language. My research is centered around how integrating digital literacy in a bilingual classroom can improve students' literacy development and help close the opportunity gap.

Literacy curriculum for multilingual learners: A comprehensive approach to reading comprehension

In the summer of 2022, just a month after earning my Bachelor of Education in Language, Literacy, and Culture from

Western Washington University, I secured a teaching position with the Skagit Foundation for Academic Endeavors (FAE). Tasked with instructing a combined class of second and third-grade students for the five-week summer bridge program, I became part of a mission aimed at dismantling barriers to educational success for diverse learners, educators, and families.

The program's mission is to collectively break down barriers to educational achievement for diverse learners, educators, and their families and is dedicated to increasing access to summer learning through an innovative program tailored to the needs of the Skagit Valley communities. At FAE, the College Fellow and Echale Ganas programs stand out as a significant initiative. The Fellow program offers college students from the Latinx community studying education the opportunity to gain hands-on experience by co-teaching alongside experienced educators. Similarly, the Echale Ganas program offers a unique opportunity for high school students in the Skagit Valley to gain hands-on experience in the education field. Designed for 8th-12th graders, this 5-7-week commitment begins with a 2-week foundational course at Skagit Valley College. During this time, students learn about classroom management, Latinx culture, and the pathway to higher education. Following this initial phase, participants engage in a 5-week practicum, where they join a classroom as part of the teaching team. Through this guided practice, future teachers develop essential skills and cultural competence, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable education—a vision I shared as a newly certified, Latina teacher. Through this guided practice, future teachers develop essential skills and cultural competence, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable education—a vision I shared as a newly certified, Latina teacher.

Entering this role, I felt a blend of nervousness and excitement about creating a literacy curriculum that would address the needs of my multilingual, diverse learners, as well as mentoring and guiding my Fellow and two Echale Ganas teachers.

Given that all 20 my students were multilingual, bicultural, and had varying reading levels, it was crucial to consider their unique backgrounds, language proficiencies, and cultural experiences when designing instructional materials and activities. Many times, multilingual learners (MLLs) do not have opportunities to demonstrate their full understanding and comprehension (Goldenberg, 2020). Reading was an area where many multilingual students tend to underperform in comparison to their grade level standards (Ogletree and Griffin, 2020). Now, having completed a master's degree in language and literacy, I am entering year three of teaching in the program and continuing to develop my literacy curriculum to better serve my students. In my research, many common ideas arose surrounding the best way to support multilingual learners and bilingual education, while effectively integrating technology. Through both research and experience, I have discovered three strategies that positively impacted my MLLs in their reading comprehension: making the content culturally relevant, utilizing multimodal tools, and fostering social interactions within the learning process.

Make it culturally relevant

The first thing that I knew I wanted to do for my literacy curriculum was ensure I had culturally relevant materials that would not only engage students but also reflect their identities and backgrounds. Having authors such as Yuyi Morales, Matt de la Peña, Duncan Tonatiuh, and René Colato Laínez accessible and integrated into the curriculum, gives students the opportunity to see themselves represented in literature, have their experiences validated, and promote a positive self-identity. Culturally relevant authors, such as these, resonate with diverse backgrounds, including bilingual and multilingual students, and provide opportunities for language development. Additionally, these authors often explore complex themes like identity, immigration, and social justice, fostering critical thinking and empathy among students.

Integrating cultural relevance into literacy instruction not only enriches the learning experience but also fosters equity by affirming students' identities and creating meaningful learning experiences. When students encounter texts and discussions that resonate with their cultural backgrounds, they feel valued and validated, enhancing their self-esteem and motivation to engage with the material. When planning my literacy curriculum, I knew that many students had not seen their identities reflected in the literature they were reading in their schools and home—it was very similar to my own experiences. Ultimately, educators must create pathways for diverse learners to meaningfully engage with reading materials, enhancing their comprehension, and promoting inclusive learning outcomes. Recognizing linguistic and cultural diversity as assets, educators can cultivate inclusive reading materials and environments that support the development of strong reading comprehension skills for all learners.

Integrate multi-modal tools

In our educational landscape, the imperative to address the diverse needs of multilingual learners (MLLs) has never been more pressing. Too often, these students face barriers to demonstrating their full understanding and comprehension within traditional literacy instruction frameworks. However, by embracing a multifaceted approach that integrates multimodal tools and digital literacy, we can unlock their full potential and foster profound advancements in literacy skills. As educators, there are a variety of strategies we know that can support diverse learners. Some strategies include reading to students every day, teaching phonics explicitly, building background knowledge to support comprehension, using audiobooks and other tools that support students' comprehension. Technology and multimodal tools can aid what we are currently doing to increase reading comprehension. Digital literacy offers a dynamic platform for differentiation, catering to the diverse needs of learners. In my classroom, I use platforms such as Epic! and Kids YouTube for engaging read alouds that also provide access to even more diverse and meaningful texts. Having access to digital text and digital reading platforms have many advantages as well, especially when working with MLL students (Delacruz, 2014). Multimodal platforms that complement and convey meaning and information beyond the written text, such as providing translation, music, videos, and more serve as another opportunity to help our learners increase their reading comprehension. It is not enough to add technology into students' reading curriculum and hope to help increase their comprehension. We must ensure that the technology we integrate into our lessons is not just for the sake of using technology, but rather to enhance the learning experience and promote meaningful engagement. Recognizing the rich linguistic repertoires of MLLs is paramount. By harnessing multimodal tools such as visual aids, interactive software, and bilingual resources, educators can tap into the diverse linguistic backgrounds of these students (Hagen Alvarado, 2020). These tools not only scaffold comprehension but also empower MLLs to leverage their full linguistic resources, bridging the gap between their native languages and English.

Equity and access are also central considerations. Digital technologies offer avenues to mitigate disparities in educational opportunities among MLLs, ensuring equitable access to resources and support. Initiatives such as one-to-one device programs, which provides each individual student with their own device, and digital libraries bridge the digital divide, providing all students with the tools necessary for literacy development and academic success. Multimodal tools and digital literacy in literacy instruction represents a transformative approach to supporting the diverse needs of multilingual learners (Hagen, 2020). By embracing these innovative strategies, educators can create inclusive, engaging, and equitable learning environments that empower MLLs to thrive in today's digital age and beyond.

Make it social

One common misunderstanding that many new teachers—myself included—is associating noise and conversation with being off task. When working with my diverse class, I noticed many times students were talking during directions and modeling. Now, I realize that my students were using their full linguistic repertoires to help one another, ask questions, and demonstrate their understanding. A lot of learning activities are set up as individual tasks, but I shortly realized the impact of allowing social interactions in literacy classes for enhancing student reading comprehension. Through collaborative activities with classmates, students can practice language skills in authentic contexts, receive peer support and feedback, and gain insights into diverse cultural perspectives. These social interactions foster critical thinking skills, increase engagement with reading materials, and create a supportive learning environment where multilingual learners can thrive academically. Overall, integrating social elements into the literacy curriculum offers valuable opportunities for language practice, cultural exchange, and collaborative learning, ultimately aiding multilingual learners in developing their reading comprehension abilities.

Necessity of creating an inclusive literacy curriculum

Through developing my own literacy curriculum for the summer, I found that some instructional practices are pivotal for influencing students' motivation, engagement, and reading competence (Gallagher, 2023; Guthrie and Klauda, 2014). Effective literacy instruction for MLLs involves direct instruction in interactive learning environments, where the unique needs of multilingual learners are addressed with tailored support and resources. Teachers must recognize and integrate students' diverse backgrounds into the curriculum to move away from traditional, often white-centric, ways of learning. By acknowledging the flaws within school systems and curriculum and embracing the value of all students' contributions, educators can create inclusive learning environments that honor existing knowledge and perspectives (Zemelman and Duchesne 2003). Students are inherently diverse, and it is the responsibility of educators to provide them with an equitable education that honors and embraces their individual strengths and identities.

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CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Ortiz, K. (2025). A Culturally Relevant, Multimodal, and Social Literacy Curriculum for MLLs. *WAESOL Educator*, 50(1), 17-19.
