



Excerpted from *Supporting English Language Learners: A Curriculum Companion to the ETFO Welcome to School Poster* by Zaiba Beg, Kathryn Holst and Rob Persad

USING FIRST LANGUAGE (L1) AS A RESOURCE

BENEFITS OF STUDENTS' HOME LANGUAGES

Many students in Ontario are learners of two or more languages. International and Canadian research studies have shown that success in developing a second language is grounded in first-language competency. Although the two official languages of instruction in Ontario schools are English and French, it is still important for multilingual students to maintain and continue to develop their first-language skills.

In 21st Century classrooms, multilingualism is indeed an asset and resource to be leveraged every day. Teachers and student peers in the classroom do not need to have exper-

“I AM ALWAYS SORRY WHEN ANY LANGUAGE IS LOST, BECAUSE LANGUAGES ARE THE PEDIGREES OF NATIONS.”

— SAMUEL JOHNSON

What Schools Can Do...

- Messages delivered to students, parents and the community, implicitly and explicitly through school newsletters, announcements, curriculum nights, etc. should encourage the maintenance and continued development of children's first languages.
- Include encouraging reminders about the benefits of using home languages when communicating to students and parents about debriefing assigned homework or about reading in any language at home.
- Post student-created bilingual/multilingual signs in common areas of the school.
- Feature a language every month throughout the school to promote inquiry about languages spoken by students in the school. Ways to shine a light on the students' languages may include displays containing information on various languages, discussions, invitations to guests or volunteers who speak the feature languages, and performances.
- Engage in school-wide writing activities to develop and publish illustrated dual-language stories. Once the narratives are compiled and published, copies can be placed in the school library or posted on a school website. These can be narrated through various apps.
- Inform parents/guardians of international/heritage language classes for their children offered in the school district or community.
- Offer extra-curricular activities that encourage students to embrace their first languages. Meaningful first-language use could be applied to storytelling circles, poster campaigns, playwriting and theatre productions, and song selection for choirs. As an example, students may create skits, announcements, school-wide messages about the environment using multiple languages. As well, playground safety helpers could be empowered to use first-language.

tise in students' languages in order for them to be used as a resource in the classroom.

Embedding first-language use as part of classroom practice is a form of equitable teaching. Even when classrooms are limited to one or two ELLs, the use of first language should be emphasized and utilized. Not only do students need to understand that their first language is embraced, acceptable and welcomed but also its importance to their future learning.

The students come with a lifetime of learning that is rooted in all of the languages they have learned thus far. To exclude L1 from learning and the classroom would be unnatural and unfair to emergent bilingual students.

English language learners arrive in our classrooms with a proficiency in L1 and as teachers we can help students leverage their first language as a resource. Our job is to create a supportive environment to facilitate use of this resource to support new learning during English and French instruction, as appropriate.

Use of student languages as a strategy contributes to students' positive self-image and supports their learning in the following ways:

- ELLs who have opportunities to process an assigned task in their first language will more readily understand the expectations.
- When students with strengths in L1 are allowed to convey their ideas orally or in written form in their home language, they may be able to demonstrate more depth, breadth and detail.
- ELLs rely on their first language when they are early beginners in acquiring English or older students with strong first-language skills. This process is part of learning a new language; students process information from their first language to English at a rate and pace with which they are comfortable. English language learners may feel more comfortable in the classroom and culturally accepted when this is acknowledged.
- Further, strategically embedding L1 in our classrooms helps English language learners and all learners to develop as compassionate empathetic, resourceful and flexible learners.

What Classroom Teachers Can Do ...

- Co-construct a language policy in your classroom with your students. Create a visual list of practices and shared values about use of languages to support learning and inclusion. Deciding on norms about first-language usage as a class ensures that all students feel included, whether or not they speak more than one language.
- Encourage the use of first language through reading, writing and oral activities during guided reading groups or literature circles. Incorporate texts that have dual-language print. Consider incorporating texts in L1 for new, early-beginner students who have a highly developed first language as a way to promote rich conversations and thinking.
- Provide reading texts (i.e., novels, short stories) in L1 that are reflective of the students.
- Students that share the same L1 can sometimes be grouped together to support deeper thinking on new topics introduced in the classroom. Such groupings can also support students to check for understanding and invite opportunities to compare the first language and target language.
- Parts of read-alouds, conversations, follow-up activities, etc. may be done in L1 to support deeper connections to the learning.
- Student-created texts can then be translated into English by students, parents, staff, volunteers or with some support of free online translation sites (e.g., Google translate).
- Invite students to add on to class displays, anchor charts and concept maps using subject-specific vocabulary (e.g., math, science, social studies) for a specific lesson/unit both in English and in L1 to support academic learning and thinking. Wordles (<http://www.wordle.net/>), word walls (e.g., numbers) and tiered vocabulary charts for a specific unit can also incorporate L1.
- Help students create personalized dual-language glossaries/dictionaries to support their learning about a new topic.
- Build in L1 components in rich tasks or multi-step projects where students can use their language to support their learning or presentation of learning.
- Allow students to brainstorm on graphic organizers in L1 before they begin writing a new story.
- Embed L1 as a strategy into core French and French immersion classroom strategies to support students learning French.
- English language learners will also benefit from a meta-awareness about languages. When students intuitively compare and contrast their L1 with English, they understand the differences between the two languages and become better language learners. Celebrate and highlight observations made by students.
- Provide time for students to talk about what they notice about the features of the languages they use. Students might compare and contrast English, French and their home language by deconstructing oral and written texts. Ask them about what they notice and what they wonder about. Encourage learners to ask more questions.

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