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Newsletter

In this edition...

| | | | |
|----|---|----|---|
| 3 | LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENTS | 22 | ADVOCATING FOR MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS BY: MARI B. RASMUSSEN, PHD, DAKOTA |
| 5 | BEGINNING TRIALS WITH AI IN ELEMENTARY ELL SETTING | 25 | WHY SHOULD NATIVE ENGLISH-SPEAKING TEACHERS LEARN ENGLISH GRAMMAR TO SUPPORT MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS? |
| 8 | USING KAHOOT! FOR INTERACTIVE REAL-TIME ENGAGEMENT IN CONTENT-LANGUAGE INTEGRATED INSTRUCTION FOR MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS | 29 | HAN MITAKUYAPI - HELLO RELATIVES |
| 13 | FROM CURIOSITY TO COMMITMENT: HOW I FOUND MY PATH IN ML EDUCATION & ADVOCACY | 30 | TALKINGPOINTS: BUILDING EFFECTIVE HOME-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS |
| 17 | LANGUAGE LEARNING AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING THROUGH ART | 33 | HUTTERITE EDUCATION: A REWARDING PLACE TO TEACH |
| 19 | SUPPORTING VISUAL LEARNERS THROUGH IMAGE AND ART: USING PICTURING WRITING TO SUPPORT LITERACY | 36 | EMBRACING THE BRILLIANCE OF MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS: UNDERSTANDING THEIR STRUGGLES AND STRENGTHS |
| | | 37 | ADULT EDUCATION TEACHER REFLECTION: DO YOUR HANG-UPS AFFECT YOUR STUDENTS' LEARNING? |

United in Purpose: Advocate, Educate & Inspire

Message from the Co-Presidents

After reading and reflecting on past newsletters wondering what we could share in this welcome, the topic of change in South Dakota and North Dakota school districts and communities over the years has been frequently discussed. This is still so relevant this year in similar and very different ways. As summer is fading away and another school year is fast approaching, the winds of change continue to blow. However, in the midst of this constant reality, whether positive or challenging, we know that one element always remains the same... EL/ML teachers are some of the most amazing teachers! EL/ML teachers are united in their purpose and commitment to removing barriers to learning and to the belief that all can learn and succeed with the right support. We are united in the belief that these learners and their families that we have the privilege to work with are such valued members of our classrooms and communities. We are united in the belief that our learners teach us so much each day too. As we recognize that the winds of change will continue to blow, both positive and challenging at times, opportunities for networking with others in our field have been and continue to be vital to our collective success. We are so excited for this upcoming conference and the opportunity for all of us to come together, learn from each other, and to be united in purpose.

As co-presidents, we have had the opportunity and privilege to work with many amazing people across North Dakota, South Dakota, and nationally as we prepare for this year's conference in Sioux Falls in October. This opportunity to meet others and learn from them has been one of the most exciting and rewarding parts of our co-presidency experience so far. We are incredibly grateful for this opportunity to serve our organization in this capacity and we are learning so much along the way! We would like you to join us in thanking the following people who are serving on the conference committee for the work they are putting into making this year's conference great:

Dakota Breen
Kristijana Dogan
Bobbie Kilber
Heather May

We look forward to seeing everyone in October in Sioux Falls!

Casey Elder and Stephanie Jungers, Co-presidents



Meet the Officers and Board Members



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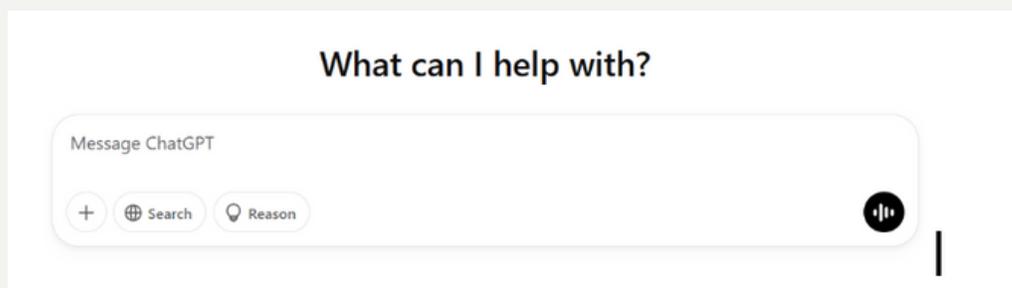
ERIN BRURUD

Beginning Trials with AI in an Elementary ELL Setting

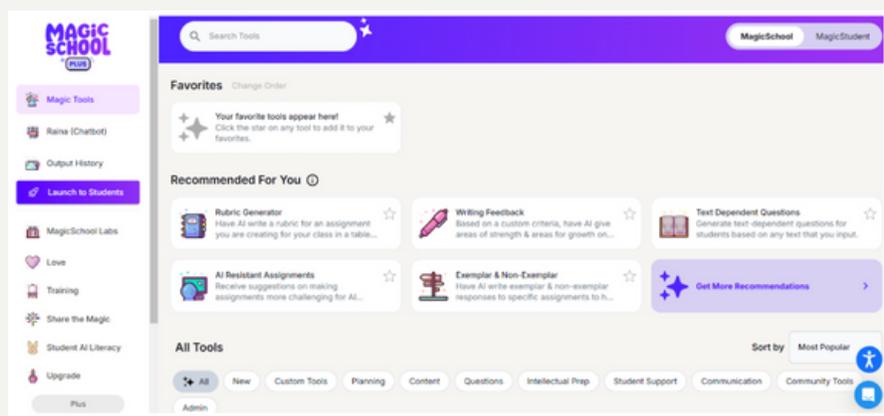
BY: CASEY ELDER

AI is becoming a well known tool in education. I was a bit hesitant to start using AI as it felt like one more thing I had to learn (and I didn't have time for). Maybe you can relate. While I am still no expert, I have come to realize that it can be an asset to my instruction. I am going to attempt to break down using AI in an elementary ELL teaching setting for someone who is wanting to explore for the first time in hopes your first trial will be less overwhelming than mine was. The two platforms I have started to use and learn more about are Magic School AI and ChatGPT. There are many more to consider and try when you are diving into the world of AI, but in my experience getting to know one or two well allows you to better use the tool.

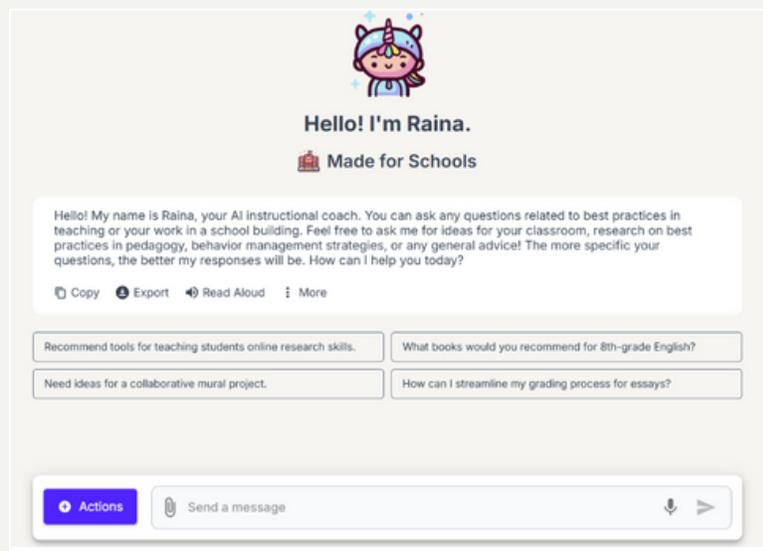
This is what ChatGPT looks like on it's home screen:



Magic School AI looks a bit more overwhelming when first logging in.



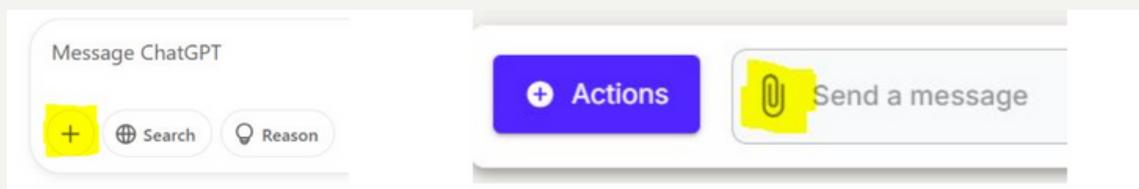
Go over to the left sidebar and click on Raina (Chatbot) to get started in Magic School AI



A feature that I use frequently with both tools is the pdf uploader.

The first step is to make sure you have the pdf of whatever you are wanting to use saved somewhere. In ChatGPT click the plus sign and in Magic SchoolAI click the paper clip. This will enable you to select the pdf that you have saved and upload it into the site.

I use this tool to help me modify assignments given to students by classroom teachers.



Once the upload is complete you type into the message box what you would like done with the pdf.

I always start my commands with the word please. Here are some commands I have used:

Please give only two multiple choice answers for each question.

Please change the multiple choice questions to fill in the blank.

Please give a word bank for the fill in the blank questions.

Please separate the word bank into five questions per section.

Please adjust the wording of the questions for a ____ grade reading level.

Please pick out the important vocabulary for each question and give a definition for each.

Please change this assessment to only ten questions.

Please give a sentence frame for each short answer question.

Another way I use these two AI tools is when I am lesson planning. It can be especially helpful to use AI when the group I am working with is a wide variety of WIDA levels and I want to differentiate a similar assignment/lesson for everyone. AI has also been helpful as I am co-planning with teachers for upcoming units. I try to think of these AI tools as quick ways to create ideas I already had in my head.

These are ways I start my commands:

Please generate...

Please generate a five paragraph essay at a four grade level about why we should have more recess.

Please create...

Please create a worksheet to review common and proper nouns for first grade.

Please provide...

Please provide a student friendly definition for the words: ecosystem, habitat, and appearance

Please write...

Please write sentence frames for a third grade student writing an informational essay on penguins.

Please explain...

Please explain the plant life cycle using a first grade reading level.

AI is helpful for teachers as it streamlines tasks that were once using our precious planning minutes. With tools that offer tailored educational resources and recommendations, AI enhances the teaching process, fosters creativity, and ultimately can contribute to improved student outcomes. I hope that you are able to take advantage of some new AI knowledge in the upcoming school year.

SEEKING SPONSORS

The Dakota TESOL Conference attracts over 200 educators of multilingual learners across ND and SD making a great opportunity to show support for both education and our regional communities.

All tiers of sponsorship include

- customizable sponsor profile on conference app that allows making leads with attendees a breeze.
- brand exposure on conference app home page & agenda as well as print materials

\$2,500 Gold Tier also includes:

- listed sponsorship of one of our keynote speakers (Valentina Gonzalez or Risa Wood) OR luncheons
- complimentary booth in the exhibit hall
- complimentary conference registration

\$1,000 Silver Tier also includes:

- Listed sponsor for one of our five breakout rooms or our networking social
- complimentary conference registration

\$500 Bronze Tier also includes:

- complimentary conference registration

SEEKING VENDORS

Dakota TESOL Conference is seeking vendors for our exhibit hall. Our conference is great for vendors that support professional development, advocacy, multilingual education, culturally responsive teaching, and language acquisition.

\$300 to book your spot!

Dakota TESOL

October 20-21, 2025
Holiday Inn City Center
Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Visit our website or email us for more information!

www.dakotatesol.org
dakotatesol@gmail.com

Using Kahoot! for Interactive Real-Time Engagement in Content-Language Integrated Instruction for Multilingual Learners

By Alysha Isono and Hyonsuk Cho, PhD.

Technology for Teaching and Learning

Technologies can enhance teachers' classroom instruction by offering additional resources for practice and engagement. Teachers should carefully evaluate specific technology and thoughtfully choose the tools that will effectively support their students' needs and backgrounds. In this paper, we will focus on Kahoot!, a popular online program, that has been widely used in the classroom in the past ten years. Numerous studies have demonstrated that Kahoot! positively impact academic performance, classroom dynamics, and students' motivation (Wang & Tahir, 2020). Kahoot! is an interactive tool that engages participants in real time using devices like phones or computers.

Theoretical Support

Social Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) emphasizes that learning is an active, social process in which individuals construct knowledge through interaction with others and their environment. This theory highlights the importance of collaboration, dialogue, and engagement in facilitating deeper understanding. Kahoot! aligns well with this framework, as they promote real-time participation, peer interaction, and immediate feedback. By incorporating quizzes, polls, and other interactive elements, these platforms create dynamic learning environments that encourage students to actively engage with content rather than passively receive information. Through social interaction and collaborative problem-solving, learners can construct meaningful knowledge, making these digital tools effective in educational settings.

Review of Kahoot!

Kahoot! is a game-based audience/student-response-system platform that allows users to create and play quizzes, surveys, and other interactive activities in an engaging and competitive way. The teacher can generate interactive quizzes for learners to review and practice language skills. This customization feature is beneficial as it allows teachers to adapt the online platform to effectively meet students' needs (Petrick, 2019).

Kahoot! is easy to use. With practice, young students from second grade on should be able to use the program with little teacher support. The program is not intended specifically for multilingual learners, but teachers can develop activities to promote language acquisition, such as key vocabulary, sentence structure, and listening/reading comprehension. The time-based format of Kahoot! does not allow for wait time that many multilingual learners need. Fortunately, teachers can remedy this by enabling a 'no points' mode in Kahoot!, which eliminates the pressure of earning points based on response speed. Teachers can have students play as teams rather than individuals.

A Vignette from a Teacher of Multilingual Learners

In the following vignette, it is described how Alysha, a teacher of multilingual learners, can use Kahoot in her classroom, detailing the types of questions provided, how the questions can serve as discussion topics to teach key vocabulary, and how the activities can be used for formative assessment.

In a recently designed science unit plan developed using the SIOP (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol) model, I incorporated Kahoot! as a review activity for a heterogeneous classroom of 5th graders in Hawaii. The integrated unit plan focused on ecosystems and addressed content and language objectives. The content objectives were for students to identify and categorize organisms as producers, consumers, apex predators, and decomposers using examples from the local environment. They were also expected to explain how energy is transferred through an energy pyramid using key content vocabulary. The language objectives were for students to be able to orally present about energy pyramids, using key vocabulary to describe the flow of energy and the roles of organisms within an ecosystem in their skit presentations.

In Kahoot!, I created questions that varied in complexity and required learners to review and apply academic vocabulary and key concepts. Examples of multiple-choice questions included: “The energy from living things first come from __,” “Which of the following is an apex predator?” “Which level of the energy pyramid has the highest energy available?” True or false questions were also included, such as “Energy for organisms decreases as you move up the energy pyramid. In this pyramid, hawks get the least amount of energy” (with a sample energy pyramid shown).

After each question, learners were prompted to engage in discussions to share their reasoning, such as “This answer makes the most sense because...” Learners were also able to ask questions for clarification. This activity ensured that students developed a strong understanding of the topic and built academic vocabulary. These interactive group discussions were helpful for the culminating project of the unit, a student-created skit because learners were able to solidify their understanding of the key vocabulary and content concepts that are needed for the project.

My current work as a multilingual language teacher requires me to work explicitly with multilingual learners on language structures. The students I work with often face challenges with verb usage including regular and irregular verbs. Kahoot! has helped me with providing repeated practice on targeted verb forms while maintaining student engagement. For example, as students engaged in content-based activities, I continued to reinforce correct verb usage within the context of the ecosystems unit for students who needed it. As a result of participating in regular practice with applying verb forms through Kahoot!, multilingual students have shown an increase in correct usage of verbs. My intention is to support students in applying target language structures confidently, so they can use them more effectively in the classroom environment.

Kahoot! for All Four Language Skills

One drawback to Kahoot! is that the program is mostly text-based. As Gottlieb (2021) warns, too much reliance on print-dependent testing does not fully measure learners' multimodal abilities. Therefore, Kahoot! should be used mindfully to ensure that students are given opportunities to connect to and show their learning in multiple and meaningful ways. That is, while this format is engaging and easy to use, it may limit the opportunity for students to practice speaking and listening skills, especially for multilingual learners. However, incorporating discussions after each question or having students create quizzes through discussions can help address this limitation. By encouraging students to explain their reasoning, ask questions, or clarify concepts in spoken language (e.g., What made you choose this option? What was your reasoning?), teachers can provide opportunities for oral communication and deeper understanding. This approach not only supports language development but also fosters critical thinking and reinforces the content in a more interactive and comprehensive way. The teacher can then facilitate discussion after each question so students and teacher can explain the reasoning for correct and incorrect answers. This would also be an opportunity for learners to ask questions.

Flip the Quiz: Student-designed Kahoot Quizzes

Educators can use Kahoot! to actively engage students beyond quizzes. Students can create their own questions, collaborate, and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, fostering dynamic and autonomous learning. For instance, teachers can lead students in generating a list of academic vocabulary essential to the ecosystem unit. Students can revisit the content and language objectives to identify content-related understandings. Then small groups can collaborate to create questions that address potential misunderstandings or gaps in knowledge. Another option could be for students to anonymously submit wonderings to a box throughout the unit. Later, small groups could receive those wonderings and generate questions and answer choices that help clarify student confusion. This can further increase student autonomy and engagement using Kahoot.

Conclusion

Kahoot!, an easy-to-use and customizable technology tool, can be a valuable asset for the content-language integrated instruction of multilingual learners for several reasons. The use of technology should not replace authentic social interaction (Altavilla, 2020). The benefits of rich discussions include the use of language development in informal and academic settings and increased understanding of complex ideas (Altavilla, 2020). Therefore, rather than replacing authentic social interactions, technology can be integrated to enhance collaborative learning experiences. Collaborative quality interactions among peers can be incorporated within the use of Kahoot!. Students can be divided into partners or small groups so they can discuss their thinking before providing a response agreed on by the group. This will encourage students to ask questions, elaborate on their responses, and provide peer support.

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Authors

Alysha Isono is a multilingual learner teacher at Wai`alae Elementary Public Charter School in Hawai'i. She is currently pursuing her M.Ed. in TESOL and plans to graduate in August 2026 from the University of North Dakota. Her professional interests focus on early childhood education, with a particular emphasis on fostering language acquisition in multilingual learners. (alysha614@gmail.com)

Hyonsuk Cho, Ph.D. is an associate professor of TESOL at the University of North Dakota (UND). At UND, she has taught TESOL courses, such as ELL Methods and Materials, Second Language Acquisition, Linguistics for ELL Teachers, Introduction to Multilingual Education, and Language Structure and Analysis for ELL Teachers. Her scholarship focuses on multilingual students' language, academic, and social-emotional development, as well as teacher education and professional development. (Hyonsuk.cho@und.edu)



2024 DAKOTA TESOL TEACHER OF THE YEAR

SIRI PENN

Siri Penn is an English Language Tutor at the Adult Learning Center in Bismarck. After volunteering and substitute teaching for several years, she began leading a classroom of English Learners. This is her third year teaching English Language to adults. This fall she also began a new class for caregivers and their preschool children called L.E.T. (Learning English Together). With a B.A. in Psychology and Religion/Philosophy from the University of Jamestown, she is intrigued by the different learning styles, attitudes and cultures she sees in the classroom and the various methods used to engage diverse learners. At the ALC she has found her niche: serving the community and having dance parties at work. She has four children, a new daughter-in-law and loves going on adventures with her husband of 25 years (who does not consider grammar lessons to be adventurous despite his wife's enthusiasm for the subject).

MISSION STATEMENT

Dakota TESOL's Mission is to provide professional development and networking opportunities for ESL/EL professionals so they, in turn, can better meet the needs of those they serve. 12

From Curiosity to Commitment: How I Found My Path in ML Education & Advocacy

BY DAKOTA BREEN

Growing up in a small, rural town in North Dakota, I left for college without ever having heard the terms English Learners or English as a Second Language. If there were multilingual students in my K–12 school, I was unaware of them.

It wasn't until I began my undergraduate studies at the University of North Dakota, majoring in English Education and minoring in Spanish, that my understanding of language learning began to shift. A sociolinguistics course opened my eyes to the complexities of English language acquisition and the social dynamics that shape how language is learned and used. My curiosity deepened, and I sought out opportunities to connect with international and immigrant students through tutoring and conversation support.

Over the next few years, those experiences would profoundly reshape my worldview. I worked with multilingual adults from around the globe—each encounter offering a new perspective and connection. I met a woman from Burkina Faso raising her young children in university family housing; until that moment, I hadn't even heard of the country, let alone known that French was its official language. One North Dakota winter, I tutored a woman from Saudi Arabia whose husband was studying aviation. She graciously invited me into her home for a meal—and even to share in hookah, a gesture of inclusion not typically extended to women in her cultural tradition. Another summer, I worked with an older woman from Bhutan who had lived in a refugee camp in Nepal. Though our spoken language was limited, we built a relationship grounded in mutual learning and respect. She took me to the local Asian market to teach me food names in her language; I took her to Dairy Queen to practice ordering in English using conversation frames from our workbook.

Through these encounters—and many more that followed—I came to understand something vital: while language and cultural differences can feel uncomfortable, there is tremendous value in sitting with that discomfort. When we make space for mutual exchange, the learning becomes more than academic—it becomes human, personal, and deeply transformational.

When I eventually became a classroom teacher, I carried those early lessons with me. It was because of those experiences that I pursued my ESL endorsement and took a job as a sheltered instruction English Language Arts teacher. I quickly learned that supporting multilingual learners requires more than good intentions—it demands thoughtful planning, strong collaboration, and an unwavering commitment to equity. Whether designing scaffolded lessons or advocating for MLs in school-wide decisions, I found myself leaning into the role of advocate more and more.

While I like to believe that my past thirteen years in ML education have made a difference—for students, families, my district, and even my state—I often find myself overwhelmed by how much work remains. Now, in 2025, I can think of no time in my career when advocacy has felt more urgent. The need to speak up for our multilingual learners has only grown louder.

Many ML educators can relate to the heaviness we feel during the Trump administration, when anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies cast long shadows over our schools and communities. I think of the palpable fear of families wondering if they would be torn apart by ICE, children worrying that loved ones might not return home. Travel bans targeting the very countries our students came from, while federal funding for crucial programs like Title III (EL services) and Title II (adult education) hang in the balance.

These aren't abstract policy debates—they are deeply personal. They shape who shows up to school, how safe they feel, and whether they believe they belong. If you are called to advocate like I am during this time, I'd like to suggest some ways we can help—at every level:

- At the personal level, educate yourself on the rights of multilingual students and their families. Keep up to date with what is happening by watching the news, following advocacy groups and individuals on social media, listening to podcasts, and reading articles. Suggestions are provided below.
- At the classroom level, teachers can ensure that students' identities and home languages are affirmed daily. Build space for students to use their full linguistic repertoire, include their cultures in your texts and examples, and most importantly, see multilingual learners as capable contributors—not just students in need of support.
- At the school level, advocate for multilingual educators to have a seat at the table—on leadership teams, in decision-making groups, and in curriculum design. Establish clear processes for monitoring language growth alongside academic progress, and make sure ML data informs school improvement plans.

- At the district level, develop intentional, well-funded ML programs that include strong professional development for general education teachers. Align curriculum, instruction, and assessment so that multilingual learners are not left behind or left out. Push for equitable access in all facets of education and extracurriculars.
- In your community, build authentic partnerships with families—through translated materials, culturally responsive outreach, and events that center family voices rather than tokenize them. Advocate for policies that support inclusive enrollment practices, adult education, and access to interpreters. Volunteer for or connect with local community nonprofits that support New Americans.
- In your state, connect with coalitions working to improve language education policy and policies relating to immigration. Advocate for legislation that protects funding for Title III and expands support for newcomer students, ML teacher pipelines, and effective English Learner programs. Share your experiences with legislators who may not understand the impact of their decisions on real classrooms and real children.

Podcasts to listen to or blogs to read

| Title | Link |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Empowering ELLs Podcast and Blog | Podcast / Blog |
| Equipping ELLs Podcast | Link |
| Boosting Achievement ESL | Link |

Social media accounts to follow

| Group Name | Link |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| Advocating for MLs | Facebook Group |
| Engaging ELLs | Facebook Group |
| Leading ELLs | Facebook Group |

Collations and Organizations to join

| Organization | Link |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| TESOL International | Join TESOL |
| Dakota TESOL | Join Dakota TESOL |
| North Dakota United | Join ND United |
| South Dakota Education | Join SDEA |
| National Education | Join NEA |

Valentina Gonzalez is a doctoral student, prominent educational consultant, and author known for her passionate advocacy and dedication to multilingual learners. Before educational consulting, Valentina worked in public education as a classroom teacher, an ESL teacher, a district-wide ESL facilitator, and a district professional development specialist. As a sought-after speaker and keynote presenter, she travels nationwide, inspiring educators with her powerful message that bilingualism is a gift. Valentina's steadfast commitment to promoting literacy, celebrating cultural diversity, and nurturing language development is deeply rooted in her experiences as an immigrant and English learner. Her mission is to ensure that multilingual learners receive the high-quality education they deserve. For more information on her work, visit www.ValentinaESL.com.



October 20-21, 2025
Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Meet our Keynotes!



Risa Woods is a second-generation immigrant, seasoned educator, consultant, and speaker with years of experience supporting Multilingual Learners in K-12 schools. As a former ELL teacher, she finds joy in equipping classroom teachers with practical, research-based strategies to make instruction more accessible and engaging for Multilingual Learners. She founded her business, Every Teacher, on the belief that all teachers can confidently support language learners with the right tools and guidance. Risa provides professional development for schools nationwide that are ready to create more equitable, learner-centered classrooms. She also shares quick tips and easy strategies with thousands of educators in her teacher community on Instagram at @risawoods_. Through her work, Risa hopes to empower educators to take small instructional steps that lead to impactful and systemic change for culturally and linguistically diverse learners.



Language Learning and Social Emotional Learning Through Art

By: Kristijana Dogan

Art is a powerful bridge between communication and emotion, making it an ideal tool for enhancing both language learning and social emotional learning (SEL). When integrated into educational settings, art encourages students to express themselves, explore diverse perspectives, and develop meaningful connections with others—all while building essential language skills.

Visual and performing arts offer an immersive context where language is naturally used, whether through discussing a painting, writing poetry, or acting out scenes. Students are exposed to new vocabulary, grammatical structures, and idiomatic expressions in a way that feels organic and relevant. Art encourages storytelling, interpretation, and dialogue, all of which are vital in second-language acquisition.

For example, ML students in the Grand Forks Public School district were able to experience visual and performing arts throughout the summer. Performing arts was incorporated into a play, *Super Hero School*, to celebrate World Refugee Day. This play allowed the students to share their “super hero power” to the community and has allowed the community to play off from this by using, “What is Your Superpower?”

Students also had the opportunity to immerse themselves into visual art by working with artists to create projects to express themselves and use language. These projects included canvas painting, chalk art, hand art, and sand art. Students were also selected to join an art camp to help express language and culture. Through this art camp they learned about culture and cultural art while language was also incorporated.

This is an example of the hand art project which used supplies already in the classroom, tagboard or paper and markers. Students traced their hands on the tagboard and then decorated with markers as they wished. The example below is showcasing the sand art. For the sand art students used stencils to create their design and filled the intricacies with colored sand of their choice. Students felt the calming effect of the art and were fully engaged, even those who were commenting that they didn't like art. Each art piece was unique to the student creating their masterpiece.



These projects, especially the hand art, showcased the personality of the student. Many included cultural pieces and aspects of themselves as well as their passions such as sports, music, gaming, fashion, and so much more. The hand art is a fast project that can be done in an hour or two and supports the SEL awareness of the ML students. It allows them and others to see all of the gifts and talents they possess and contribute to our communities and to our united country. It was enlightening for others as they shared their art and explained why they decorated their art as they did. This is a great and not time consuming art project that all students can produce successfully and be proud to share.

Art also opens a safe space for students to explore and articulate their emotions. This is particularly valuable in SEL, where understanding and managing emotions, empathy, and interpersonal skills are key. Through art, students learn to express complex feelings nonverbally, which can then be translated into verbal or written language.

When language learning and SEL are integrated through art, the results are transformative. Students don't just memorize words—they communicate meaning. They don't just study emotions—they experience and understand them. Art becomes the common ground where cultural identity, emotional depth, and linguistic expression empower students to become both empathic and understanding individuals.





The students were intent upon their work, examining their paintings, propped in their easels, studying the list of words on the whiteboard, and returning to their task at hand – words and sentences for their stories. I easily facilitated their work, happy that I was finding success with students who struggled with language development. These students were involved with Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy Through Art®. Picturing Writing is a process that supports literacy and writing by using pictures. The developer of this approach, Beth Olshansky, explains that “Pictures serve as a universal language. As human beings, our brains are hard-wired to think and record meaning in pictures” (2018, p. 1).

Supporting Visual Learners through Image and Art: Using Picturing Writing to Support Literacy

**Mari Rasmussen, PhD, Dakota
TESOL Past President**

“Visual literacy” is also seen as a strength and characteristic of Native American and Indigenous Learners. Historically, numerous languages were spoken on the North American continent, and the people relied heavily on visual intelligence and pictographs (Dyc & Milligan, 2000). Nature provided food, clothing, and shelter, and it was essential to observe and “read” the signs of the natural world.

I witnessed the engagement with the images that students developed, as well as the sense of ownership and connection with their writing that students brought to their work through Picturing Writing. They are excited to read their own stories along with their classmates. Essential to the process is Olshansky’s four-step workshop approach, which incorporates literature, discussions, modeling, work sessions, and group shares (2018).

Although suitable for all students, Picturing Writing is particularly effective for Multilingual Learners and struggling readers.

The process involves all four domains of listening, reading, writing, and speaking. I made efforts to address the “Key Language Uses” of the 2020 WIDA Standards (2020), aligning the process with English language development standards. I also found ways to incorporate elements of the science of reading by providing mini-lessons, as needed, on phonics and phonemic awareness. Vocabulary development, another piece of the science of reading, is an integral part of Picturing Writing. Additionally, essential for Multilingual Learners (Escamilla, Olsen, & Slavick, 2022), is the use of oral language, a crucial component of Picturing Writing, in brainstorming, discussion, and group sharing.

It is also easy to incorporate content areas in the Picturing Writing units. “Time of Day,” the foundational unit that teaches fundamental skills, provides an opportunity to address science standards related to the day, night, the Earth’s rotation, and other topics, depending on the grade level. My students were given homework to watch a sunset and observe a sunrise on the bus to school in the morning. We went outside to look at the landscape and learn about prairie biomes. We discussed what happens when the seasons change.

Finally, while some might consider that school activities involving painting and artwork take away valuable time from lessons that support students in meeting state academic achievement standards, research documents the importance of the arts in the curriculum. Hunter-Doniger explains that the arts should be viewed as a pillar of education due to the skills

related to problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity, all of which are important in the 21 st century (2017). Olshansky’s research documented that students outperformed others on state academic achievement testing in classrooms where the Picturing Writing process was implemented regularly (2007).

Picturing Writing is an excellent approach to supporting writing and literacy among multilingual learners and struggling readers, adaptable for all grade levels. More information on Picturing Writing, along with Olshansky’s contact information, is available on her website at <https://picturingwriting.org/>. Olshansky and Rasmussen will also present at the Dakota TESOL conference in Sioux Falls, SD, in October 2025.

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Advocating for Multilingual Learners

By: Mari B. Rasmussen, PhD, Dakota TESOL Past President

The four of us, members of Dakota TESOL, sat quietly in our chairs, listening to the discussion on House Bill 1494, which concerns state funding for English Learners. We had just testified on the importance of the bill (with some adjustments) before the House Education Committee. We listened quietly, respectfully, along with others who had come to testify or observe. I glanced at the walls of the committee room and thought about the efforts of the legislators who come to Bismarck and make decisions that affect us all every two years. It was both exciting and nerve-wracking.

The discussion on House Bill 1494 continued for another day. It was eventually voted down, despite an effort by those in support of the bill to incorporate it into the large education funding bill, which met with limited success. We will try again next session!

Advocating for Multilingual Learners can take many forms. It can involve collaborating with state legislators on funding and policy bills that benefit students and their staff. It can include advocating on the federal level on legislation, funding, and policy. Advocacy can also involve advocating for students in your own community and school district. There are many misunderstandings about the Multilingual and Multicultural populations in our schools and communities. Educators and other advocates often find themselves in the role of creating awareness and disseminating information about their students to administrators, other educators, school board members, and others. There may be a need to form a committee to ensure the school environment supports the families of Multilingual Learners. There may be a need for a voice to advocate for appropriate accommodations for assessments. There is a need for more resources to address the unique needs of learners.

Staehr Fenner defines advocacy for English Learners as “working for ELs’ equitable and excellent education by taking appropriate actions on their behalf” in her book, *Advocating for English Learners: A Guide for Educators* (2014). She outlines several ways teachers can advocate, including collaborating with others, providing professional development, encouraging family involvement, and, most importantly, delivering effective instruction and assessment. Staehr Fenner explains the importance of appropriately trained teachers who maintain high standards and provide instruction that supports success (2014).

Life can be challenging at times, and it’s hard to find time to form a committee, write to a legislator, participate in professional development, testify before a legislative committee, or engage in other forms of advocacy. Yet, it often does not take as much time as one thinks, and the benefits can be very gratifying.

Dakota TESOL offers several ways of advocating for Multilingual Learners:

- Joining Dakota TESOL helps support the organization and opens opportunities for professional development, career growth, and friendship, while also advocating for the Multilingual Learner population. Membership information is available on the website at <https://dakotatesol.org/join-dakota-tesol/>.
- Participating in the annual Dakota TESOL conference opens opportunities for advocacy. Registration for the 2025 conference is available at <https://dakotatesol.org/>.
- The International TESOL organization provides support to members and others in advocating for Multilingual Learners. Visit their website at <https://www.tesol.org/advocacy/>.
- The Dakota TESOL Association has an Advocacy Committee. If you are interested in joining the committee, contact Mari Rasmussen at maribrasmussen@gmail.com.

References

Make Your Nominations by October 1st

DAKOTA TESOL TEACHER OF THE YEAR AWARD

Everyone is welcome
to submit!

THE NOMINATED TEACHER MUST (1) HAVE DEMONSTRATED EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING, DEVELOPED INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS OR DESIGNED NOVEL APPROACHES TO TEACHING ENGLISH LEARNERS, AND (2) HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THE ACTIVITIES OF THE ORGANIZATION.

DAKOTA TESOL ADMINISTRATOR OF THE YEAR AWARD

THIS PERSON MAY BE AN ADMINISTRATOR (PRINCIPAL, COORDINATOR, DIRECTOR, ETC.) THAT HAS DEMONSTRATED RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS AND SUPPORT FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS IN THE CLASSROOM, SCHOOL, DISTRICT, COMMUNITY, OR BEYOND.



JOIN DAKOTA TESOL

Membership in Dakota TESOL is open to the public and consists primarily of ESL/EL professionals in the Dakotas and surrounding states.

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Why Should Native English-Speaking Teachers Learn English Grammar to Support Multilingual Learners?

BY: HYONSUK CHO, PH.D., SOPHIA TURNER, TYLER GUSTIN, & KALLI SCHERBENSKE

The way English Learners (ELs) or Multilingual Learners (MLs) acquire grammar differs significantly from how native English speakers do. While native speakers typically absorb grammar intuitively through early exposure and social interaction, second language learners often rely on explicit instruction, and they acquire grammar through a wide range of routes over the long term (e.g., formal instruction, social interaction, feedback, and practice). Native English-speaking teachers may not experience the challenges and journey that English learners face when learning English grammar. By studying and reflecting on grammar points that are particularly difficult for language learners to master, native English-speaking teachers can bridge the gap between their implicit understanding of grammar and the explicit knowledge needed for effective teaching. Effective teaching involves both subject-matter knowledge and the ability to present content in ways that make sense to learners, which is central to Pedagogical Content Knowledge (Shulman, 1987). In the context of language teaching, it is important to have a clear and conscious awareness of how language works (Andrews, 2007).

This article features reflections of three native English-speaking teachers on their understanding of a grammar point, modal verbs (e.g., can, may, will, could, might, would, should). They are all currently teaching in K-12 schools in Minnesota or North Dakota. These reflections were written during a week of a graduate-level grammar course that covered a range of topics, including present, past, and future tenses, modal verbs, phrasal verbs, prepositions, the passive voice, and conditional sentences, along with corrective feedback and approaches to teaching grammar. Throughout the course, the teachers engaged deeply with the textbook, lectures, and peer discussions in addition to completing an individual tutoring project, a presentation, and a final reflection. Each teacher describes new insights and knowledge they have gained about ‘modal’ verbs and explains how they plan to apply this understanding in their teaching.

Modal verbs are helping verbs as they modify verbs. Modal verbs typically appear directly before a main verb or before the auxiliary verbs such as ‘be’ and ‘have.’ Main characteristics of modals are (1) they do not contract with ‘not,’ (2) they undergo subject-auxiliary inversion in yes/no questions, (3) they are repeated in the tag questions, and (4) they do not take the present tense -s ending or the past tense -ed ending. Depending on these characteristics, modal verbs can be classified as pure modals (e.g., can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, would), marginal modals (e.g., dare, need, ought to), and semi-modals (e.g., be going to, be supposed to, have to; Corwan, 2008).

Ms. Turner, EL Teacher

Before this week's readings, Folse (2016) and the lecture VoiceThread from Dr. Cho, I had never heard of modals! This week was really interesting to read about because it was all new information. I often find myself in disbelief over all the grammar concepts that I use that I have no idea actually exist. For example, words like *can* that we never put into present or past tense endings.

As an English Learner teacher for grades K-4, my students don't use modals very often, so this would be a great concept to teach them. I especially think it would be helpful to teach my EL students about *can* vs. *could*. EL students are often perceived as rude or blunt because they don't always understand that the word *could* has the ability to soften a request. I would explicitly teach them and explain to them softening requests. I would do some research in their home language to see if I could find an equivalent phrase or concept of softening requests to help them understand. After that, we would practice how to use *could* instead of *can* when making requests. Teaching this and similar concepts can support students in developing effective communication skills for social interaction, helping them navigate a new language and culture more fluently and appropriately.

Another concept that was tricky for me was the forms of modals. There's a set of characteristics that modals possess, unless they don't. Modals appear directly before the words like *can* or *be* or before a verb. Modals can also contract with *not*. For example, *shouldn't*, *won't*, or *can't*. Modals also don't take on the present -s ending or past tense -ed ending. There are also extended meanings of modals, like speculation, suggestions, or inferred probability. I would wait to teach my students the extended meanings until they have a solid understanding of modals. That is really difficult for me to keep track of and fully understand. If I were to teach this concept to my students, I would use a lot of visuals and graphic organizers to help them understand when they can use and when they shouldn't use specific words and phrases.

Modals will take a lot of practice for my students to learn and for me to understand in order to teach them. I will need to use a lot of corrective feedback and refresh my memory often in order to teach them modals correctly.

Mr. Gustin, Social Studies Teacher

Before my study in the TESOL program, I knew of modals, but I didn't quite have a grasp as to their full meaning. As such, when I learned about them, it proved to be a very interesting and informative session on my part, as it proved to be another example of how, as a native English speaker, I tend to effectively take grammatical points for granted in that I know what is/is not grammatically correct, but I just don't always have a proper understanding as to why something is/is not correct.

On that note, modals are a very good example of something that I understand the effect of; I just was not able to necessarily articulate it prior me being taught them. A modal is a word that modifies a statement in such a way that it applies "nuances" (Folse, 2016, p. 272) to words or phrases. Insofar as potentially, radically changing the meaning of two seemingly very similar phrases. As an example, 'I might cook tonight' versus 'I must cook tonight,' the modals of *might* versus *must*, directly provide a sense of urgency or lack thereof, which in turn changes the meaning and intensity of the statement.

Likewise, prior to my learning I did not fully grasp how EL/ML students are able to learn modals effectively. It makes sense that it's partially a vocabulary reason, as there is just an extreme number of modals in English upon retrospective thinking, and the vast majority of them are not mutually exclusive, and as such some students may find themselves wondering about the exact differences between, may and might, as an example provided by Folse (2016).

In my own teaching, I believe that the more effective means of teaching modals (given my current teaching context of teaching in a secondary school setting) is the strategy of grouping modals together by meaning, rather than individually teaching them. Whilst such a strategy is more difficult for lower proficiency students, it does clarify the complexities in a way benefits students in the long run. As the information is chunked by subject, and thusly they can see the various modals for each definition.

Ms. Scherbenske, EL Teacher

Modal verbs were a grammar topic I had not focused on in my years of teaching, before the reading from Folse (2016) and watching Dr. Cho's lecture video. Although I use modal verbs like *can*, *will*, and *may* regularly in my own speech, I had not thought much about their meanings or how to teach them. The idea from Folse that modals add "flavor" to a sentence helped me better understand their purpose (Folse, 2016, p. 272). This comparison made me realize how modals express tone, mood, and the speaker's attitude, which are important for EL/ML students to learn.

One point that stood out to me was how often the modal *will* is overused. Folse notes that ELs rely on this modal too much, especially to express the future (Folse, 2016, p. 271). I see this in my classroom, particularly with my Hispanic students, who often say *will* when they mean *might* or *could*. Helping students choose modals that show different levels of certainty will be an important part of my teaching.

Another key takeaway is that modals like *may* can have more than one meaning. For example, *may* can express permission or possibility. This can easily confuse EL students who may not recognize the difference without clear instruction and examples. Going forward, I plan to create a classroom chart that lists modal verbs, their meanings, and example sentences. This would give students a helpful visual reference as they practice using modals correctly in speaking and writing.

Conclusion

Through a graduate-level grammar course for teachers, three teachers engaged in explicit learning of English grammar concepts that EL/ML students often find challenging. This article focused on their reflections on learning about modal verbs (e.g., *may*, *can*, *will*) and their efforts to design instruction informed by both their new knowledge and critical self-reflection. All three teachers described how their understanding of modal verbs deepened and how they intended to apply this knowledge to more effectively and confidently support their EL/ML students. More specifically, they acknowledged that the course prompted them to reflect on their everyday use of modal verbs, forms their students and they commonly used but they had not previously examined in depth. Through the course, they developed a clearer understanding of how modal verbs function and mean and recognized why their complexity can make them particularly difficult for EL/ML students to learn and use accurately. Their reflections underscore the value of revisiting English grammar from a teacher-learner perspective to build explicit grammar awareness and making meaningful connections to classroom practice. This process not only strengthened their instructional planning but also contributed to their ongoing professional growth. These findings point to the importance of integrating opportunities for teachers to explore and internalize grammatical concepts as part of their professional development, especially in contexts where they work with EL/ML students.

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Author Bios

Hyonsuk Cho, Ph.D. is an associate professor of TESOL at the University of North Dakota (UND). At UND, she has taught TESOL courses, such as ELL Methods and Materials, Second Language Acquisition, Linguistics for ELL Teachers, Introduction to Multilingual Education, and Language Structure and Analysis for ELL Teachers. Her scholarship focuses on multilingual students' language, academic, and social-emotional development, as well as teacher education and professional development. (Hyonsuk.cho@und.edu)

Sophia Turner is an English Language Learner teacher at an elementary school in Hastings, MN. She is currently enrolled in the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) master's program at UND and will graduate with her M.Ed. in May of 2026.

Tyler Gustin currently teaches Social Studies at a Secondary Education level for the Finley-Sharon School District in North Dakota. He is a Graduate Student in UND's TESOL master's program, soon to begin his second year.

Kalli Scherbenske is an EL teacher in Wishek, North Dakota. She is entering her 8th year of teaching. This is her second-year teaching English learners. Before this position, she taught first grade in a different district. She will graduate with her M.Ed. in TESOL in August 2026 from the University of North Dakota.

Han Mitakuyapi - Hello Relatives

By: Kolette Medicine

My name is Kolette Medicine and I am Lakota. I have been a classroom teacher for 10 years. I learned some tips and tricks and want to share with ALL teachers the inclusion of adding indigenous languages and practices in your classroom.

Bilingual Signage & Materials: Label classroom items and school supplies in both English and the native language to encourage familiarity and add pictures. When making your own cards, add native language and visuals of feathers, or native geometric, floral designs.

Storytelling & Literature: Introduce books, folktales, and songs in native languages to create engagement and label your classroom library. Hang up posters that have native greetings.

Peer Learning: Have students who speak the language fluently support their classmates in learning words and phrases.

Guest Speakers & Elders: Invite native speakers to share traditions, histories, and personal experiences.

Daily Practice: Use greetings, instructions, or short conversations in the native language to make it part of everyday learning.

Sensory: use traditional, local wild rice and beans, and feathers as manipulatives in your math centers.

If you have questions or would like more information, please reach out to me as the Native American Education area interest representative.



TalkingPoints: Building Effective Home-School Partnerships

By: Stephanie Jungers

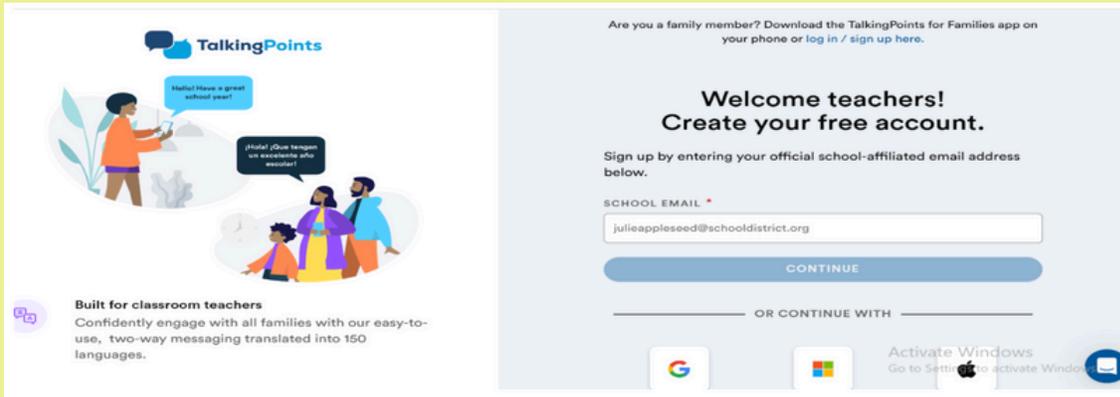
I recently had the opportunity to attend a family engagement conference with some colleagues and administrators. While there, I had the opportunity to meet with staff that work with TalkingPoints and attend a session that discussed TalkingPoints as well. Some of you may not be familiar with TalkingPoints as there are other family engagement and communication apps out there. I personally have used TalkingPoints' free version for several years now and have found it invaluable in my work as an EL teacher. So I thought I would take this opportunity to share some information with you that I have learned about TalkingPoints, tips for using it, and how it could be a family engagement platform schools can use to effectively engage multilingual families (and all families) in their child's education.

To increase family engagement, we need to develop positive, meaningful partnerships between families and school rather than having one-sided communication. This communication platform removes language barriers to communication for families with home languages other than English. I have had families that some may consider unengaged with their child's education become engaged through texting. When they have the ability to communicate in their home language and through the ease of a text message, they initiate conversations as well as receive messages from me. I have found that attendance has improved for some of my learners by periodically sending quick positive messages to their parents in their home language too. By sending those quick positives, it has helped to keep that relationship strong if challenging conversations occur later.

It has also reduced the need for interpreters when it comes to arranging conferences and meetings. Years ago, I used to have an interpreter call to help us schedule conferences, but now I can simply send messages to parents in their home language and ask what time and day that they would be able to sign up for a conference. I can send a sign up genius link as well through a text. Interpreters definitely still have their purpose for meetings or sensitive conversations, but a lot of basic communication, pictures, positive communication, and announcements can get sent this way now. If parents can't attend a conference in person due to transportation barriers, I have even been able to tell parents through a text message how they could download a free Zoom or Microsoft Teams app on their phone to have a virtual meeting instead. Then I have been able to send the virtual meeting link through a text message to the parent and interpreter to hold the meeting virtually.

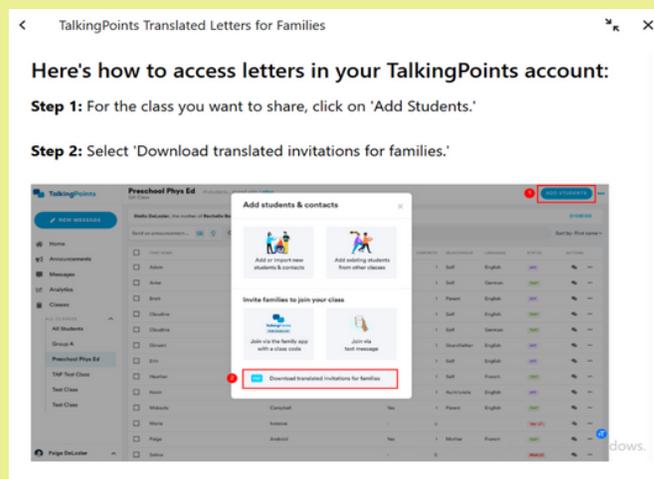
It is simple to sign up for TalkingPoints and their basic version is free. With the basic version, you still get text messaging with families sent in 150 languages. If messages are not clear, you can click on a button beside the message you receive for more clarification and a human will read it. They quickly send you back a clearer version of the message.

You can just go to talkingpts.org and create a free teacher account.



Once you have signed up for your free account, you can invite or add family contacts. I usually talk to new families when I meet them to give them a school tour and ask them if it is ok if I communicate with them through text messaging with this program. Then I proceed to add the parent contact info right at that initial meeting and send them a message in their home language. I share with them that they don't have to download the app if they don't want to download the app. They could just save the generated phone number from the first message they receive from me as my contact information. If they download the app, they have to know how to go into their settings on their phone and allow notifications. I have found this to be a barrier because they sometimes will not know that I am sending them messages without notifications allowed unless they go into the app regularly to check. So it is easier to use it for many families just as a regular text message contact rather than using the app.

If you want to share parent letters explaining the platform with parents in their home language, you can do that as well by following the steps below.



Some teachers have shared their TalkingPoints class with co-teachers and connected other teachers that work with a learner under the free account by adding co-teachers. You can just click on the three dots in the upper right corner after you click on your class name and click on “share class.” Also there are more features and data available for teams within the paid version that can be explored.

Some of the newest features are pretty impressive as well. For example, with the paid version you are able to translate documents quickly such as newsletters, flyers, and invitations and families receive them in their home language. They also have embedded family engagement expertise that helps you with writing messages, tips for increasing attendance, and translated audio messaging as well. In addition to those features, the paid version has quick pre-made kudos that you can send out to families to build those positive relationships. The last cool feature that I would love to explore would be their home learning activities. You can select a grade level and topic and TalkingPoints will create an easy-to-use home activity to continue the learning and conversations at home! Here are links to more information from their website about these features along with a comparison between features in the free version versus the paid versions.

<https://learn.talkingpts.org/hubfs/pdf/TalkingPoints-Document-Translation.pdf>

<https://learn.talkingpts.org/hubfs/pdf/TalkingPoints-Product-Comparison.pdf>

<https://learn.talkingpts.org/hubfs/Sales-Collateral/TalkingPoints-Whats-New-for-Back-to-School-2025-Overview.pdf>

There is more information about this family engagement platform that could be shared beyond this quick overview. For more information, visit their website and you can even click on their chat button in the corner to ask questions. If you have not already found an effective family engagement and communication platform to use, hopefully this information gives you an idea of how TalkingPoints could be used to help your school remove language barriers and build effective home-school partnerships with your multilingual families.

Hutterite Education: A Rewarding Place to Teach

By: Kristina Starr

I have the privilege of holding the title of Rockport Colony teacher for the past 13 years. Before teaching at Rockport, I taught for one year at Lake View Colony and for three years prior to that I worked for the Freeman School district where I worked with students from Wolf Creek and Tschetter colonies. So, all my years in education have been spent at a colony, however that isn't where my background of being around Hutterites started. My mother taught at Maxwell Colony for over 30 years. My mother was a fantastic educator and a wonderful role model for me; I am so happy that I chose to follow in her footsteps. Growing up around Hutterites was part of life, and I was very familiar with their culture. Some things that stood out to me were the love the students had for learning, the excitement they brought into the classroom, the strong relationships that were built within and around the classroom, and of course the amazing homecooked meals!

Hutterite Background

Hutterites are an Anabaptist group of people with a communal way of life and a deep-rooted religious tradition. The Hutterites originated in the 1500s in Europe during the Reformation, facing persecution for their belief in adult baptism, nonviolence, and communal living. They eventually settled in North America, with colonies today primarily located across parts of Canada, South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, and Minnesota. Each colony functions as a self-sufficient, community that is very faith-based and is centered around agriculture and shared labor.

If you are unfamiliar with Hutterites you may recognize them by their distinctive clothing. Women and girls wear long dresses and head coverings which reflects their commitment to modesty and community values. Men usually wear dark trousers with snap-up shirts and suspenders. Their clothing style is plain and uniform, symbolizing equality and humility.

Day-to-day life on a Hutterite colony is centered around community, work, and faith. Everyone has a role to play, the men often work in farming, livestock, or trades like carpentry, while women cook, sew, tend to gardens, or care for children. Three meals a day are eaten together in a communal dining hall. Church is attended as a group twice daily. Children attend both German school and English school, they also help in the gardens, mow the grass, help with chores, and babysit.

Hutterite Education

When Hutterite children turn five years old they begin German school. This takes place before and after English school and is directed by their German school teacher or teachers. They attend English school usually attending for grades K–8 in a multi-grade level classroom.

Each colony may have a unique arrangement: some have preschool, two levels of kindergarten, two levels of 1st grade, or possibly continue after 8th grade. When they enter English school they bring along a strong work ethic, a high level of respect for authority, and a deep sense of community. The students are a tightly bonded group, often having siblings or cousins within their grade or classroom.

In their homes Hutterites speak Hutterisch which is a dialect of German. They begin learning English at school. Their English exposure may be limited outside of the classroom, making language development a top priority for educators in the English classroom.

A Rewarding Journey of Growth

One of the most meaningful aspects of working with Hutterite students is the unique opportunity to walk alongside them throughout their educational journey. Many educators begin teaching these children in preschool or kindergarten and continue instructing them throughout all their years in school. This continuity allows for deep relationships to form not just with the students, but with their families and the entire colony community. The eagerness to learn that gets brought into the English classroom is truly inspiring. They are proud of their progress, and the joy they show in mastering a new letter, word, story, or concept is contagious. As educators, we get to witness their transformation, see their ah-ha moments, be right beside them as they turn from a shy kindergartener to a confident reader. It's a privilege to be included in their world not just as a teacher, but as a consistent presence who sees them grow from babies to young teens. For those of us fortunate enough to be part of that journey, it is one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching. I love my job, the students I get to teach, and the families that I get to work with.

Embracing the Brilliance of Multilingual Learners: Understanding Their Struggles and Strengths

By: Lisa Symens

In classrooms across the Dakotas and beyond, multilingual learners (MLs) bring a wealth of cultural and linguistic diversity. While their presence enriches our educational environments, these students often face challenges that go unnoticed. Recognizing and addressing these unspoken struggles is crucial for fostering an inclusive and supportive learning atmosphere.

Unspoken Struggles of Multilingual Learners

1. Language Fatigue: Navigating daily academic tasks in a non-native language can be mentally exhausting. MLs often expend significant cognitive energy to comprehend lessons, complete assignments, and engage in classroom discussions.

2. Fear of Making Mistakes: The anxiety of mispronouncing words or using incorrect grammar can lead to reluctance in participating, hindering language development and classroom engagement.

3. Cultural Dissonance: Balancing the cultural norms of their heritage with those of the school environment can create internal conflicts, affecting students' sense of identity and belonging.

4. Translation Pressure: Many MLs serve as interpreters for their families, adding responsibilities that can impact their academic focus and emotional well-being.

5. Underestimation of Abilities: Limited English proficiency may lead educators to underestimate MLs' intellectual capabilities, resulting in lowered expectations and missed opportunities for advanced learning.

Strategies for Educators to Support Multilingual Learners

Drawing from Zaretta Hammond's insights in *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, educators can implement the following strategies:

1. Build Learning Partnerships: Establish trust and rapport with MLs to create a safe space for learning. Recognize their cultural backgrounds as assets in the learning process.

2. Scaffold Instruction: Provide structured support by breaking down complex tasks into manageable steps, gradually releasing responsibility as students gain confidence.

3. Activate Prior Knowledge: Connect new content to students' existing knowledge and experiences, facilitating deeper understanding and retention.

4. Incorporate Visual Aids: Use images, diagrams, and graphic organizers to support comprehension and cater to diverse learning styles.

5. Encourage Collaborative Learning: Promote group work and peer interactions to enhance language skills and build a sense of community.

Celebrating the Brilliance of Multilingual Learners

MLs possess unique strengths that contribute to a dynamic classroom environment:

- Cognitive Flexibility: Managing multiple languages enhances problem-solving skills and adaptability.
- Cultural Insight: MLs offer diverse perspectives that enrich classroom discussions and promote cultural awareness.
- Resilience: Overcoming language barriers and adapting to new environments demonstrate determination and perseverance.

Shifting Terminology: From "English Learner" to "Multilingual Learner"

The term "English learner" focuses on the acquisition of English, potentially highlighting a deficit perspective. In contrast, "multilingual learner" acknowledges the existing linguistic repertoire of students, emphasizing their capabilities and assets. This shift aligns with an asset-based approach, recognizing the value of students' home languages and cultures. By understanding the challenges and celebrating the strengths of multilingual learners, educators can create inclusive classrooms that empower all students to succeed. Embracing culturally responsive teaching practices and adopting inclusive terminology are vital steps toward educational equity.

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Adult Education Teacher Reflection:

Do Your Hang-ups Affect Your Students' Learning?

By: Heather May

How do you feel about giving a swear lesson? Teaching vocabulary for underwear, hygiene, and body parts? Explicitly describing the difference in pronunciation between penis and peanuts or sheet and shit? If you feel squeamish about any of these or actively avoid such things, take a step back and consider how your own hang-ups or taboos might be affecting your students' learning or use of authentic English.

One academic year, another teacher and I shared all our morning students. They were split into two leveled groups, and we each taught both groups for 2 days per week. It not only maximized our planning time (we repeated the lessons for both groups, scaffolded to their level), it allowed our students to hear two different accents and experience two different classroom environments. It also allowed for us teachers to avoid things we were uncomfortable with or to take on things we could excel at. I would never sing and dance with class (but she did) and my colleague would never talk about underwear or body parts (but I did), so we complemented each other's approach and content.

The next year, our schedules did not allow us to share all the students, and we were acutely aware of what each group was missing. We agreed that we would each push ourselves out of our comfort zones. My colleague made herself say "bra" and "underwear", and I played a few singing-dancing videos and joined in the movement. If we hadn't done that, the students probably wouldn't have known the difference, but we knew what they deserved and we tried to be more confident teachers with more well-rounded approaches.

It's easy to dismiss teaching what we are uncomfortable with, especially with the availability of translators and dictionaries on phones. But our students don't know when those translations are unreliable. During a hygiene lesson, students were looking at vocabulary in the Oxford Picture Dictionary, and one gentleman who was a fan of learning synonyms pointed to "shower" and said, "Teacher, I will douche after work. Is it ok?" Not only did I say it wasn't ok, I delicately explained why. If you feel embarrassed explaining something, perhaps translating the explanation into your students' home language is a more comfortable option for you.

You might be an excellent grammarian or a terrific reading and writing teacher, but what many of us are most uniquely suited to provide our students are opportunities to listen to and speak authentic English. In a class I was teaching recently, one student was peppering me with a litany of grammar questions, which I was happy to answer. Another student interrupted after the third question saying, "Heather, please stop. Our time together is so short. We can learn grammar by ourselves in books and online at home. What we really need is your speaking. We need to learn how to listen to real English."



We hope you see you there!!