

# Home Languages: An Effective Tool for Learning and a Challenge to “English Only” Policies



**Taiko Aoki-Marcial's** teaching philosophy is based on the principle that collective knowledge is always greater than the individual, and a room full of students is the most important resource that an instructor has. She firmly believes in the value of collaborative, multicultural language learning that places students' experience and learning goals at the center. A Seattle native, she received her B.A. in Journalism from the University of Washington. After teaching and living in Spain, she attended the Complutense University of Madrid, where she completed her M.A. in Communications. She has been teaching since 2006 in language schools in the U.S., Spain, Thailand, and Japan. In her current role at Literacy Source in Seattle, she teaches and writes curricula for the federally funded Ready to Work program, which focuses on language and employment skills development and support services.

## Overview

English Only instruction has long been accepted as the ideal methodology in language acquisition programs. This article challenges the pedagogical soundness of this ideal, argues that these policies serve to perpetuate racial and linguistic inequities, and provides strategies and ideas for incorporating L1 activities in the ESOL classroom.

## Effectiveness

L1 in the language classroom benefits learning in numerous ways, including, but not limited to making meaning from text, collaborating and negotiating, maintaining communication, scaffolding, and increased confidence (Pan, 2010). According to authors Butzkamm and Caldwell, research clearly supports the principled use of the learner's first language in aid of second (and foreign) language learning (2009). English Only policies limit and devalue key linguistic tools that should be considered an asset to acquisition.

A learner's L1 is inseparable from the development of a Target Language. As Ofelia Garcia notes, “international research has conclusively established that new language practices only emerge



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organization, Lauren has taught in a variety of settings and locations: among them, Houston, TX; South Korea; and Santiago, Chile. Recently accepted to the University of Washington as a doctoral student in Language, Literacy, and Culture, Lauren intends to pursue research into the use of translanguaging practices as a means to disrupt English supremacy and monolingual ideologies in language acquisition programs.

in interrelationship with old language practices” (2012, p. 3). Policies that exclude home languages disregard this important information. Conversely, language inclusive policies and practices encourage the use of one’s full linguistic repertoire to navigate complex content, compare language features, and seek clarification. English Only policies limit these functions while also (implicitly or explicitly) devaluing language diversity and stifling learners’ identities. The exclusive use of English in the classroom “has come to be justified in pedagogical terms [however], it rests on unexamined assumptions, originates in the political agenda of the dominant groups, and serves to reinforce existing relations of power” (Auerbach, 1993, p. 23). If educators are truly committed to inclusive pedagogy, learners’ linguistic and cultural knowledge must play a central role in the classroom.

## Anti-Racist Practice

Bettina L. Love’s recent book, *We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, reminds readers that the history and foundations of public education are rooted in racism, white supremacy, and language oppression. Throughout the history of the United States, English has been and continues to be used to colonize, enslave, and suppress minority groups, inflicting linguistic and cultural assimilation and eradication. Examples are numerous: among them language policies in Native American boarding schools, Japanese internment camps, Puerto Rican schools after U.S. invasion, and the Hawaiian ban on home languages in public education. In all of these instances, language in schools was explicitly and often forcefully regulated by those in power. As Love notes, “Education is one of the primary tools used to maintain white supremacy and anti-immigrant hate. Teachers entering the field of education must know this history, acknowledge this history, and understand why it matters in the present-day context of education” (2019, p. 23). Devaluing home languages in the ESOL classroom is a practice shaped by historical processes of colonization and inequity which “in the modern context, the dialectic is reproduced, with English most typically taking up the role of a more valuable language being passed on to a speaker of a less powerful language” (Motha, 2014 p. 77). The inclusion of students’ language is one piece in a “multicultural education [that] is rooted in an antiracist struggle over whose knowledge and experiences should be included in the curriculum” (Au, 2009). Approaching language instruction with a consciousness of the context that has both shaped and limited it should galvanize us to use methods and strategies that actively work towards dismantling practices that perpetuate inequity. Home language inclusion is one piece in this process.

## Getting Started: Being Explicit

Regardless of the ages, levels, educational backgrounds, etc. of your students, transparency about the inclusion of home languages in the ESOL classroom is key to the success of multilingual learning. Outlined below are several strategies to employ in the shift toward a language inclusive pedagogy:

1. **Co-creating class norms:** the creation of class norms or rules is commonplace in education. The posted list of class rules is often where one finds: Speak English Only. In some cases this rule may even have been suggested by students. In other cases, an English Only policy is the norm of an institution or teacher. Instead of beginning with a pre-determined rule (English Only or full L1 inclusion), discuss with students why, when, and how often to use home languages. Be sure to discuss the benefits of multilingualism and dispel any myths about L1 impeding English development, then aim to create a statement about language use that is inclusive and practical. Some examples across the spectrum of inclusivity: “We use English and our native language to help us learn;” “We practice English but we welcome many languages;” and “First try English, but it’s OK to use your language for help.” Include the statement on the posted norms.
2. **Problematizing “L1 policing:”** some students may have internalized messages about the inappropriateness of L1 in ESOL settings, which can result in the policing of non-English languages. One way to handle this situation is to preempt it with a problem-posing scenario, discussing ways to address the issue before it happens. Here’s an example from a beginning-level class: “Two students are talking in their home language. Another student says, ‘Stop talking! English-Only!’ The students feel hurt. They are talking in their home language to help each other. What can the class do?” A scenario such as this concretizes one reason the L1 is an important educational tool (seeking clarification) and highlights the emotional impact of excluding students’ languages, and therefore, their culture.
3. **State your objective:** is the L1 being used to introduce a new and complex idea, gain a deeper understanding, compare language features, or translate abstract vocabulary words? Continually sharing L1 activity goals with students ensures the rationale is explicit and foregrounds the benefits of multilingualism.

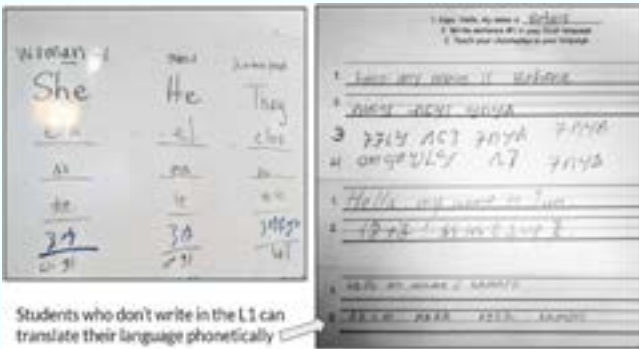
## Classroom Activities

1. **Collaborative translation:** choose a few simple sentences that illustrate a language point that you would like students to practice: for example,

comparative structures or third person conjugation. In multilingual classes, create groups according to home language. Each student needs paper for the dictation. Explain that they should listen and write the sentence they hear in their OWN language. Once you have read the sentences and students have written their translations, have them work in their groups to compare and discuss what they wrote. Next, have them translate the sentences back into English. Again, have them discuss and compare their ideas with each other. Finally, give students the original sentences and have them check their work. Then analyze differences and highlight any language points that are relevant with the class.



Students working with Google Translate



Students who don't write in the L1 can translate their language phonetically

2. **Turn and talk:** these activities are common enough in ESOL teaching and an easy way for learners to collaborate for a greater understanding of class material. Group the class by home language prior to introducing new material, and after each term or concept, allow groups to discuss their ideas and understanding in their home language. This simple strategy can be used in multiple ways. Using images to illustrate new vocabulary, have time to discuss the meaning of the terms associated with each picture in L1. Discussing new grammar, learners can use their own languages to develop a better understanding of more complex concepts. This method can also be useful for clarifying classroom instructions, getting students to quickly recap for each other in their language what they are being asked to do in a given activity.
3. **Google translate:** with access to smartphones or computers, Google translate is an easy method to incorporate home languages, develop English vocabulary, practice pronunciation, and enhance digital literacy. Provide a typical vocabulary handout with columns for definition, part of speech, picture, etc. Include a column for translation and pronunciation. Students can work independently or in language pairs to translate the words in Google. Additionally, students can use Google's audio feature to hear both the English word and the translation. This is a great way to include pronunciation and syllable stress into vocabulary practice. Check Google for students' languages, as not all are available.

4. **Limited L1 literacy strategies:** for multiple reasons, some immigrant and refugee learners may lack L1 literacy, making written activities difficult and potentially frustrating, especially for adults. Educators should be aware of students' educational backgrounds and literacy levels so as to strategically support them during L1 literacy activities. An easy adaptation is pairing or grouping limited literacy students together (same or different languages) and converting the written portion of an activity to an oral one, being explicit that they will orally address the material instead of writing in the L1. Another possibility is transliteration, helping limited L1 literacy students write their language phonetically in English. The teacher may need to model this several times, prompting the L1 and taking a best guess on corresponding characters in English. Students can then do this independently, simultaneously practicing English letter-sound correspondences and the L1.

## Extended Projects

1. **Folktales and traditional stories** from students are a great way to incorporate students' cultures and languages into the class while working on narrative skills. This work is similar to the Language Experience Approach (LEA) in that students produce the material that will be used to promote reading and writing through the use of personal experiences and oral language. This is project work that can extend over a few classes or even an entire course. Learners think of a folktale or story from their home country, possibly using the library and/or online resources to find ideas and examples in their language. They then work in language groups to remember and tell the tale, first in their home language, deciding on key details needed to re-tell it in English. Next, students then find or create images to illustrate those important details. After deciding on visual prompts, they work orally in English to recount the story. The teacher can record

or transcribe student output as they produce it. This material is then used as a basis for writing, reading, revising, and interacting with text.

2. **Community presentations** allow students to negotiate meaning in the L1 and in English, using language fluidly to achieve communicative goals with peers. Learners select a high-interest topic that is relevant to the wider school community (e.g., workers' rights, immigration policies, housing regulations, etc.) to research and discuss in small mixed-language groups. Ideally, each student in a group would share an L1 with one other person in the group, but students can also communicate across groups. After several class periods of discussion and research, each group creates a poster summarizing their topic. After practicing oral delivery of the poster, select a location for learners to display their work while students from other classes walk by, stopping to learn about each group's topic. Depending on the L1 and English proficiency of the students from other classes, the poster presenters make strategic choices about the various language resources at their disposal.

## Conclusion

Multiculturalism in school spaces is often signaled through culturally specific books, posters, and occasional food/holiday inclusion. These practices are undoubtedly important, but ESOL professionals must also be cognizant of the less obvious impact L1 production (oral and written) has on creating more equitable outcomes. As Auerbach notes, "L1 and/or bilingual options are not only effective but necessary for adult ESL students with limited L1 literacy or schooling and ... use of students' linguistic resources can be beneficial at all levels of ESL" (1993). Practices that deny students the use of their full linguistic repertoire and create a divide between home and school language are not in learners' best interests, but rather are the symptoms of a white supremacist culture seeking to maintain dominance through language. As such, ESOL professionals must prioritize students' linguistic and cultural knowledge in language acquisition programs. The authors call on educators to implement practices that leverage home languages for academic success, disrupt English language hegemony, and challenge the societally determined value attributed to minority languages.

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