

Strategic Translation for Multilingual Learners

Providing translated materials at selective moments to support multilingual learners' English language development

Instructional Practice Overview

A multilingual learner's home language (L1) can be used as an asset to develop English proficiency and achieve grade-level success. One way to do this is through being intentional about when, what, and how much to translate into L1 — and having a clear purpose for doing so. Strategic translation involves drawing on home language knowledge to provide entry points into grade-level, English-language content.

Why is this important?

Research indicates that academic skills developed in a student's home language can transfer to similar tasks done in English. This means that leveraging a student's knowledge in the home language supports acquisition of English. This happens best when students see connections between their home language and English, rather than overrelying on the home language alone.

Planning for strategic translation

There isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to strategic translation; what each student needs depends on a number of factors, such as current English proficiency levels, L1 proficiency levels, and prior knowledge of the topic at hand. Translation is most purposeful when it supports students' access to grade-level content and skills. Consider the following when planning:

- **Is language the primary barrier, or is something else blocking access?** If the barrier is something like background knowledge, cultural context, or text complexity, full translation may not be the solution.
- **Can a word, phrase, or brief explanation provide access, rather than a full translation?** Targeted support is more likely to ensure meaningful access points to grade-level content and English language development.
- **Will this translation help students engage more deeply with the English text, or will it allow them to bypass it?** Translation should be a bridge to engaging with the lesson alongside their peers, not a detour.

Common pitfalls to avoid

Keep these pitfalls and misconceptions in mind as you determine how best to offer translated materials:

- **Providing full-text translations** as a primary support can reduce students' ability to engage with the English academic language they are working to develop. For students who lack proficiency in their home language, a translated grade-level text can be as difficult to access as the text is in English.
- **Overrelying on AI or machine translation for full instructional texts** which can fail to capture an author's intent, tone, style, and structure. Machine translation is better suited to translating directions, vocabulary, or discussion sentence stems.
- **Using translation as a replacement for scaffolding** for multilingual learners. While strategic translation is supportive, multilingual learners also need scaffolded support such as sentence frames, graphic organizers, or intentionally selected groups.

Well-intentioned translation practices can sometimes do more harm than good for students' language development. The purpose of any MLL support in the core ELA classroom is to help students participate fully in class while growing as English speakers, readers, and writers. Developing English language proficiency can only happen when students engage with English, rather than avoid it. Translation is most powerful when used strategically to build bridges between languages; making connections between a student's home language and English can deepen their understanding of, and appreciation for, both. Full-text translation, in many cases, eliminates that bridge: it can isolate MLLs from their peers and, for students who lack proficiency in their home language, may not even provide the access point it seems to promise.



Appropriate Instructional Moments to Use Translation in 360

Instructional Moment	Rationale	Teacher Tips
Before reading a text, provide translations for words or phrases crucial to comprehension.	This helps students see connections between what they already know and what they are about to learn.	• Preview the lesson's Knowledge Focus and Independent Practice Short Response question for words and phrases crucial to comprehension. • When applicable, use the unit's optional Content Supportive Vocabulary Reference.
During vocabulary, grammar activities, or writing lessons provide translations that highlight cross-linguistic connections between L1 and English.	This helps students see patterns that span both languages. Developing students' metalinguistic awareness of how the two languages relate to each other strengthens skillful use of both.	• Preview the unit's vocabulary words in English and L1 for similar word beginnings or endings across languages. For example, the Spanish word ending -ción serves the same noun-signalling function as -tion in English which can help in recognizing parts of speech in English. • Compare the syntax of the unit's grammar skill to the syntax required in L1. • Preview the unit's writing arc for opportunities to highlight similarities and differences in writing conventions, essay structures, and genre expectations across English and students' home languages.
Throughout the unit, display translated visuals for key unit skills or content in the classroom.	This creates an inclusive environment for multilingual learners by supporting their sense of belonging within the classroom while leveraging their linguistic assets.	• Display translated unit vocabulary words and key terms side-by-side with their English equivalents.

What the Research Says

Research indicates that multilingual learners' academic skills, such as using strategies for comprehension, critical thinking, and knowledge of genres, can be developed across multiple languages at the same time, rather than separately within each one. Knowledge in one language reinforces understanding in the other. This means that strategic use of students' home language complements English language acquisition, rather than competing with it.

Garcia, O., & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism, and Education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

