Beyond the Label: Multimodal Strategies for Working With Multilingual Learners

Reka C. Barton

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Reka C. Barton has extensive experience teaching young multilingual learners, having spent a decade teaching elementary school in various locations including Washington DC, Northern Virginia, and Southern California. Her passion for education has now led her to a postdoctoral faculty fellowship at the University of San Diego, where she integrates multimodality into her teaching and research on topics such as language, race, and culture.

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Introduction

As a teacher educator and former elementary classroom teacher, I am often asked by teacher colleagues and teacher credential students, "So… what do I do with my English Language Learners?" My response is that we must go beyond the label and take a nuanced look at our multilingual learners, one that moves beyond the labels that the state-mandated or district guidelines designate.

As the multilingual population of the United States continues to grow and become more diverse, the classroom population follows suit. According to the United States Department of Education (2016), "English learners (ELs) have been among the fastest-growing populations in our Nation's schools, compris[ing] nearly 10 percent of the student population nationwide, and in many schools, local educational agencies (LEAs) and States, account for an even higher percentage."

While I am siding with scholars moving past the labeling of English as a Second Language, English Learner, and English Language Learners, I also acknowledge that many of the assessments, district programs, resource personnel, and state legislative offices are still using this language. Therefore, I will use the term *multilingual learners* here to join scholars and practitioners who have shifted to a more encompassing title for our linguistically diverse students. In the U.S. context, where English is hypervisible and the language of power, this hegemony renders speakers of other languages and multilingual learners marginalized or, in some cases, invisible.

Even as the label has changed over the years – Limited English Proficient (LEP), English as a Second Language (ESL), English Learner (EL), English Language Learner (ELL) – the label is incapable of capturing the power, linguistic capital, and linguistic genius that multilingual students possess. Through my own lived experiences as a language learner and educator, my perspectives on language, literacy, and pedagogy have evolved.

After ten years of teaching in an elementary school classroom, with most of those years being in dual language classrooms and five years guiding and supporting teacher candidates and early career classroom teachers, I would like to share what I have learned at the intersection of multimodality and multilingual learners. This article offers (1) an overview of some of the oversimplification of the labels around multilingual learners, (2) an insight to national and state definitions of multilingualism and English language learners, and (3) two effective and research-based visual literacy strategies to implement with multilingual learners in your classroom.

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Beyond The Label

To begin our work with the children currently in our classrooms and schools, we have to get to know them, meet them where they are, and offer adequate support, scaffolding, and safety, to set them up for success. This effort requires us to go beyond labels often attached to students in the early years of their schooling experience. These labels often follow them throughout their PreK-12+ educational career. I would like to start with the label, *EL*, an identifier frequently used in our school sites. Do we have shared language around what *EL* actually refers to? Or have we made it synonymous with the multiple ways our students are being classified? These classifications rarely, if ever, are accurate assessments of students' linguistic and literate abilities, rather they materialize from local, district and federal legislation.

In order to move beyond the label, we must first know and understand its federal and state legislative underpinnings. The federal definition of an individual labeled as an EL is someone:

A. who is aged 3 through 21;

B. who is enrolled or preparing to enroll in an elementary or secondary school; AND

C. (i) who was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English; or (ii) who is a Native American or Alaska Native, or a native of the outlying areas; and who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual's level of English language proficiency; or Prepared by the Office of Public Instruction EL Guidance for School Districts Page 5 (iii) who is migratory, whose native language is a language other than English, and who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant; AND

D. whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual (i) the ability to meet the challenging State academic standards (ii) the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English; or (iii) the opportunity to participate fully in society (see ESEA Section 8101(20)).

Two high-profile cases highlighting the rights and policies around multilingual learners are the 1974 Lau v. Nichols case and the 1981 Castañeda vs. Pinkard case. The Supreme Court ruling of Lau v. Nichols created legislation mandated that all students have access to English language instruction and content instruction. The Castañeda case mandated that districts implement and monitor the curriculum and programming that English learners receive.

While federal legislation influences language policies in states and localities, each state and district can also create and enforce language policies for their schools. Montana is one of many states that has adopted this federal definition. In addition to the federal definition, the state of Montana's growing diversity and student population has increased the representation of those students classified as ELs (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Montana's English Language Learners
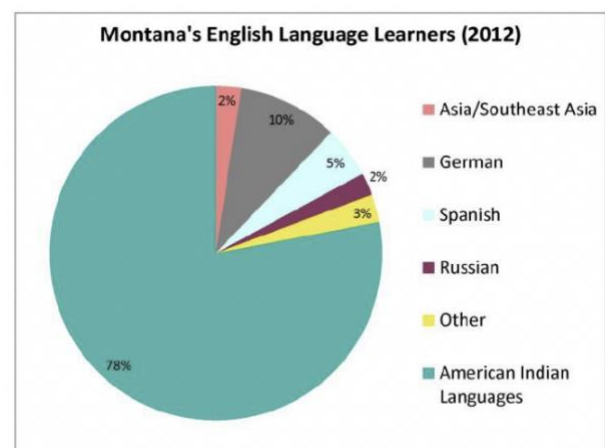
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The state of Montana's grouping of ELs is inclusive of the following children:

- American Indian children impacted by the heritage language of their family and/or community, such as Piikani (Blackfeet) or Apsáalooke (Crow).

- Hutterite children who learn German as their first language.

- American-born children of immigrants who learn their native language in the home from their parents or guardians.

- Children who come to the United States with their parents or alone (as immigrants, as children of international professors and students at the university level, as migrant workers, as international exchange students, and as refugees).

- Children who are adopted internationally by American parents.

While the percentage of Native American languages has decreased in the overall student population, Native American languages still occupy the majority of "languages of impact," meaning the language(s) other than English that makes up the student's linguistic repertoire (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.
Languages of impact in Montana
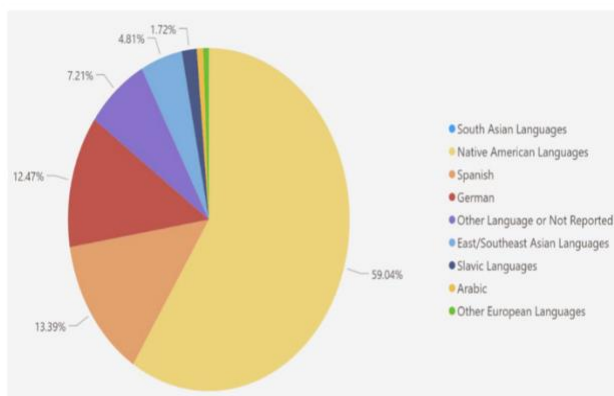
In Montana, as with other states, there are some complexities that don't allow for easy identification and assessment of a student as an EL. "Research on fair, valid, and effective assessment has brought into question existing ELL classification policies and practices," (Abedi, 2008, p. 17). While this label does not have to come with a negative connotation, there needs to be a shift in labeling a child solely from this language assessment. Multiple accounts of literacy practices and language proficiency should be taken into account in addition to a single assessment.

Beyond Reading & Writing

Before offering specific strategies to use with multilingual learners, let us first review the definition of literacy. When a teacher is asked, "What is literacy?" most will respond, "reading and writing." Then, when prompted to elaborate, the answer is commonly extended to, "reading, writing, speaking, and listening." While all of these potential responses are correct, they are incomplete.

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), in collaboration with the International Reading Association (IRA), offers an expanded definition of literacy in its English Language Arts standards which includes reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and representing visually. Very seldom do the components of viewing and producing visually get addressed in defining literacy, yet we are looking at incomplete dimensions of literacy when we reduce our vision of literacy.

To adjust to a more expansive view of how we define literacy, we must also expand how we teach, support, assess, and provide instruction when working with multilingual learners. When we go beyond the labels, the legislation, and the strict and minimal definitions of literacy, we reach a space where we can expand our notions of where and how visuals are used in multilingual learner instruction. The

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visual becomes part of the work, not just picture support.

Multimodal Strategies for Working with Multilingual Learners

When we move past the politics and designations of the labels, we can focus on who our multilingual students are and what they need. Once we do that, we can more fully support them. Multimodal strategies allow multilingual learners to access the material more fully and feel the classroom is a safe space in which they can engage, participate, and show what they know.

As you continue your work with multilingual learners, here are two literacy strategies that include multimodality: (1) Visual Thinking Strategies and (2) Talking Drawings. Both of the strategies rely heavily on the visual. For years, picture support has been a widely used strategy in literacy and multilingual learner practices. However, the attention to pictures tended to be a support or a scaffold, rather than utilizing the visual for the work itself. Illustrations are stories and can be a great foundation for literacy lessons. By expanding notions of literacy, teachers can elevate the status of the visual, and feel comfortable teaching and creating space for practice using visual narratives instead of relying heavily on written text.

Visual Thinking Strategies

The first strategy is Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), which is a low lift for teacher preparation, but offers a high return regarding student engagement and oracy development. Developed by Abigail Housen and Philip Housen and originally used in museum education, this strategy "uses art to teach visual literacy, thinking skills, and communication skills to young people" (Housen & Yenawine, 2001). VTS can be used with any highly engaging image, with little to no words. Teachers can use this strategy at any grade level and offers a space that is free from the traditional notions of "only one right answer" or a "right" or "wrong" binary answer.

Once a highly engaging image is chosen, this visual text serves as the foundation for the activity. The teacher then asks three questions: (1) what's going on in this image, (2) what do you see that makes you say that, and (3) what more can we find? This research-based question protocol offers the space for higher-order thinking and comprehension to happen. The first question allows students to make inferences and draw conclusions rather than just make a list of noticings. By encouraging students to do this deeper thinking, they are utilizing critical thinking skills and the textual evidence in the image. The second question asks them to lean into that evidence and articulate the connection between their inference and the evidence they found.

When multilingual learners can limit the cognitive load of reading and writing written text, their affective filter is lowered and the barriers often presented to them are removed they can more easily navigate, participate, and enjoy this activity. The whole group nature of this activity also allows students to hear each other's ideas via authentic input, build upon classmates' answers, and respectfully discuss the main idea while providing evidence. This process creates a community of learners where all students are heard, their contributions are accepted and validated, and there is space to practice peaceful disagreements.

All of this work done in the visual realm, can be mapped to Common Core State Standards (CCSS). For example, standards like the ones featured in the table below can be addressed in a VTS lesson (see Table 1).

These standards, along with many other standards, can be the objective of a lesson using VTS or embedded into a VTS activity. When we remember that texts can be both written and visual, we can remind ourselves that we are

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engaged in standards-based literacy instruction while using VTS.

Table 1. Common Core State Standards Addressed in Visual Thinking Strategies

Common Core State Standards	
RL.1.1 & RI.1.1	*Ask and answer questions about key details in a text*
RL.3.1 & RI.3.1	*Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers*
SL.K.1	*Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about grade 1 topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups*
SL.4.1	*Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 4 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly*

VTS can also be used as an entry point for difficult discussions around social justice issues. For example, Zapata et al. (2017) demonstrated the use of VTS to "negotiate critical content" and "collabor[ation] to make sense of complex issues" (p. 64). When implementing VTS, it is essential that the teacher allows ample time for conversation between students and is comfortable with silent moments. Silences happen when students are thinking, searching for evidence, and deciding on whether or not to enter the conversation.

Multilingual students are moving across their linguistic repertoires in seconds,

remembering rules and conventions throughout the languages, so it is crucial to afford them the time needed to do that metacognitive work and cross-linguistic transfer. Offering this slower space and extended time provides them with a safe space to enter and share during this activity. This time, or the "pause," was also referenced in the Zapata et al. study, where this pause "create[d] space for students to develop their initial responses to the critical content" (p. 65).

Another role of the teacher during VTS is validating students' responses. Once a student offers a response to question one and then provides the follow-up answer to question two, the teacher's role is to repeat or paraphrase their contribution. The objective is to affirm the students' addition to the conversation as valid and thoughtful, with visible evidence of the claim. It is not to give a yes, no, right, or wrong response. Once students notice that there isn't a wrong answer and that there is space for multiple responses, students will feel more comfortable jumping into the activity.

Furthermore, teaching with this strategy helps students make the shift that words are not the only ways we have meaning. Words are not the only text. There are also visual and multimodal texts. Students can still identify main ideas and cite textual evidence within a photograph. The deep work of critical thinking, working towards mastery of ELA standards, reading and analyzing texts are all happening. So, using this strategy allows our students to enter a space where they can develop significant meaning making and text interpretation capabilities

Talking Drawings

The second multimodal strategy is Talking Drawings. Talking Drawings is a "strategy of translating mental images into simple drawings" (McConnell, 1992, p.1). Like VTS, this strategy is not just for multilingual learners but can be implemented with all students. This

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strategy focuses on having students draw a picture before their learning and then add to that drawing after a period of learning took place. The strategy is structured so students can "revise their initial drawings and then reflect on new understandings" (Cappello & Walker, 2021, p.408). With all of the messages that multilingual learners are taking in simultaneously, building space for reflection and processing is important.

During a study cycle of a larger project, Cappello and Walker (2020) implemented Talking Drawings with hundreds of students in grades K-6 and collected over 500 student drawings. The findings suggested that this strategy "provided additional ways for students to access the curriculum and communicate new content knowledge as well as reflect on their new learning" (p.412). One of the barriers that multilingual students often come up against is a lack of access to content or curriculum due to language. Talking Drawings removes this barrier by providing access via the visual.

While there are several adaptations of Talking Drawings (Fello et al., 2006; Paquette et al., 2007; Scott & Weishaar, 2008; Cappello & Walker, 2019), the common protocol includes time to think about a new and possibly unfamiliar topic, an initial student-created drawing, explicit instruction and/or group activity, time allotted to revise and enhance the initial drawing, and some discussion around the activity.

During this strategy, students are allowed and encouraged to work across multiple modes. In this strategy, students can utilize all domains of language arts; reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and representing visually. By using multiple modes through the course of Talking Drawings, students can practice literacy skills in all of the domains and be able to show what they know through their student-created drawings.

Repeated practice and space to edit are necessary for multilingual learning. Students

need the space and autonomy to have an initial attempt and then the opportunity to build upon that product. As my colleague and I stated, "drawing can support idea development and refinement, easily revised and reshaped with growing understanding" (Cappello & Barton, 2022, p.4). VTS and Talking Drawings are strategies that create a safe and supportive environment for students to enter into content-specific conversations, speak and listen to their peers, and have time to reflect, revise, and improve upon their initial understandings. This autonomy is particularly important to their content and linguistic development and the growth of their confidence and self-efficacy.

Conclusion

Moving beyond the labels and the legislation allows for the possibility of multilingual students to thrive as complex learners with a plethora of assets and abilities. Through these expanded understandings of language and literacy, we can utilize multimodality to enhance the educational experiences of multilingual learners. As my colleague and I stated, "Visual methods are sometimes simply more efficient demonstrations of knowledge than traditional linguistic approaches used in school (e.g. family trees, cell diagrams) and they can also serve as mediational means that scaffold understanding" (Cappello & Barton, 2022, p.4). When we add visuals as entry points to conversations and vary how students can show their understanding, we are creating space for more equitable opportunities for multilingual learners and for all learners.

While multimodality is a great space to enhance your teaching practices and strategies, it should not replace explicit instruction, small group instruction and data-driven instruction. Instead, it should complement and enhance the great instruction, explicit teaching, and data-informed practices already present in your classroom. There will always be complexities and

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implications around multilingual learner labels and whatever terminology arises in the future to replace current trends, but using multimodality as a basis for literacy instruction will always be sound pedagogy.

By making space for visuals and raising the status of images, we expand how students access and respond to the curriculum, their peers, and the world. "Drawings provide[d] powerful opportunities for elementary-aged multilingual learners to reflect on content understanding and challenge dominant identity narratives assigned to them as English learners in their classrooms" (Cappello & Barton, 2022, p.4). Multimodality allows students to grow their English proficiency, content knowledge, and autonomy.

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Reka C. Barton is a Postdoctoral Faculty Fellow at
the University of San Diego. To contact, please email
rbarton@sandiego.edu