

# Multilingual Learners in Mainstream Classrooms

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### **Abstract**

The United States of America has always been known for its diversity. A country that promises to “The Land of the Free.” Many people migrate in hopes of having a better future for themselves and for their children. Along with the high diversity rates in the United States, the different number of languages are also high and yet English is the main language taught in schools. As English maintains its dominance in the education system, many students fall into the category of an English Language Learner. These students are expected to learn the English language to thrive in the education system and yet these students are not given the proper supports to help them succeed.

Each day in a mainstream classroom, students are presented with academic vocabulary and expected to learn these on top of learning a new language. This does not take into account the content students must learn and the tests they need to take. Students who do not speak English as their main language, are set to struggle in classrooms where help is not provided. Although many schools have English Language teachers, those educators are only presented with an allocated amount of time to help the student. These times are done through push in or pull out methods, leaving English Language Learners to fend for themselves in the mainstream classroom. This article provides an insight on how content teachers can work collaboratively with English Language teachers to improve learner’s success rates in the general classroom. Additionally, throughout this article, the term Multilingual learners will replace English Language Learners as the term more adequately acknowledges that students may speak multiple languages and does not define their student identity by their learning of English only.

**Keywords:** multilingual learners, English as a Second Language, co-teaching.

## **Introduction**

Mainstream teachers must take on the responsibility of learning the methods needed to provide extra support for Multilingual Learners (MLL) outside of their English as a second language (ESL) instructional classrooms. The time obtained for MLL instruction is simply less compared to the amount of time MLLs spend in the mainstream classroom. As the number of MLLs in settings around the world increases, so too does their presence in so-called “mainstream” classrooms (Percy, 2018). In American schools, students who are non-native English speakers spend most of their time in a classroom where their teacher is not ESL certified. In these environments, multilingual students are less likely to comprehend the content being taught to them without the support they need.

### **Statement of the problem**

“In 2003, nearly 50% of all MLLs received minimal services (between 0 and 10 hr per week) compared to 32% a decade earlier (Center on Education Policy, 2005). It is likely that the current percentage of underserved MLLs is even higher” (De Jong, 2013). Students who receive assistance for ESL only have an allocated time with a certified ESL teacher. This does not do students enough justice with the number of hours they spend in school. Through this blocked off period, students are expected to learn what their classmates have already obtained growing up in an English-speaking household. In addition, many content area teachers approach teaching MLLs from a deficit lens, as well. This is detrimental to MLLs due to students not being held at the same expectations as their classmates or being held capable.

## **Importance of the Study**

Mainstream teachers need to work with ESL teachers in a collaborative format. This can be done through co-teaching, co-planning or just check ins (Peercy, 2018). Through collaboration, not only will students benefit from the extra instructional time but so will the teachers. These collaborations can help mainstream teachers obtain new skills that they can apply even when the certified ESL teacher is not in the room, skills that can benefit MLLs and non-MLLs as well. (Peercy, 2018). Mainstream teachers can also focus on vocabulary and how to provide needed skills MLLs need when using vocabulary in their work. To complete collaboration, mainstream teachers, and ESL teachers must fully work together to ensure that collaboration is met thoroughly (Peercy, 2018). Collaboration can also take place instead of using the push in and pull out methods that often-hinders MLLs' learning.

Educators argue for the “importance of attending to academic language as it is integrated with content and supports emerging bilingual students’ meaning making within and across disciplines” (Pacheco, 2017). Mainstream teachers must know how to teach academic language in ways that MLL students can easily soak up the knowledge given to them. Teachers need to provide students with clear instruction that includes translating activities to tap into students’ unique cultural and linguistic strengths and deepens students reading comprehension skills (Daniel, Jiménez, Pray, & Pacheco, 2019). Through guided practice, students are more likely to grasp the content given to them compared to completing an activity on their own. With increasing population of MLL students in mainstream classrooms and the scaffolding of academic language, activities play a big role in these scaffolds.

**Focus of the Study**

This review will provide an overview of the research that asserts the ways in which multilingual learners may be more successful when they remain in the mainstream classroom and when the content and ESL teachers work collaboratively within the classroom. Although push-in and pull-out methods are mainly used in schools, collaborative classrooms benefits students more significantly. This study will discuss the benefits that collaborative classrooms have on MLLs and their educational journey.

The focus of the research is based on the factors that content teachers and ESL teachers must take into consideration when working with an MLL in a general education classroom. There are multiple factors when educators are working to get to know their students inside and outside of the classroom. These factors play a significant role in an MLLs' educational journey as they set MLLs apart from their peers. Educators must remember that an MLL's culture must be embraced and seen as an asset.

**Definitions of Terms**

**Multilingual Learner:** a student who is learning the language of instruction at the same time of learning academic content. (The term Multilingual learner is the preferred term in this article because it allows students who speak other languages, the opportunity to embrace their assets instead of seeing their knowledge of another language as a barrier to their education.)

**English Language Learner:** a student who comes from non-English speaking homes and is learning English.

**English as a Second Language (ESL):** a program to help students who speak English as a second language obtain skills to become proficient learners.

Co-teaching: when a content teacher and an ESL teacher work together to provide instruction to all students in the general classroom

## **Review of Literature**

### **Introduction**

Many school systems have an ESL program for their MLLs. The methods of push-in, pull-out and co-teaching are common in these programs. These methods are applied to help MLLs fully comprehend and learn their academic content that is being taught to them daily. Though there are three methods, not all three are often found in one school. Many schools opt for one of the methods depending on the number of ESL teachers they have. The traditional pull-out method can be less effective due to the disconnect between what is happening in the mainstream classroom and in the pull-out placement (Williams, H., & Ditch, R., 2019). Content teachers who plan lessons on their own often do not dedicate time to communicate with the ESL teacher. What is being taught in the general classroom might not be taught in the ESL classroom, causing MLLs to have a disconnect with their peers. Leading to the research examined in how co-teaching can be more beneficial to MLLs in a classroom setting. With co-teaching, MLLs are able to stay in their classroom without missing any class time or social interactions with peers.

### **Lack of Academic Success for MLLs**

In Minnesota, as of 2016, around 15% of students speak a language other than English at home and 7% are formally classified as MLLs (Williams, C.P, 2016), although all 15% of these MLLs might still benefit from some aspect of English language instruction. For MLLs to fully acquire the language, programs must be put into place for MLLs to obtain the English language. In Minnesota, 40% of MLLs are Spanish speakers and 17.5 % are Hmong speakers (Williams, C.P, 2016). Disregarding this fact, many programs still do not cater towards students' communication skills, cognitive abilities, and cultural identities. According to Williams (2016), the average 2015 NAEP Reading Performance discrepancy between MLLs and non-MLLs was

36%. MLLs, achieved 6% on at/above proficient level while 42% of non-MLLs were already at the same level (p. 13). This statistic showcases that current programs of push-in and pull-out methods are no longer working for our MLLs or perhaps have never been the most effective for our MLLs.

### **Critical Language Objectives for MLLs**

Due to the documented lack of academic success for MLLs, students are now required to take the WIDA Access test. In 1974, in the case *Lau v. Nichols*, the Supreme Court ruled that U.S. public schools must establish policies ensuring MLLs have access to linguistically appropriate accommodations for them to experience a “meaningful education.” (King, K., & Bigelow, M., 2018). Then in 2002, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which mandated new standardization and accountability requirements for American public schools, focused new attention on MLLs and required U.S. states to annually measure MLLs growth (King, K., & Bigelow, M., 2018). Although the NCLB act is no longer in place now, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), was created in 2015 to make accountability for ELs a priority and to use WIDA as a screening tool (King, K., & Bigelow, M., 2018). The WIDA Access test assesses students across four language domains (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and places them on the six-level WIDA Proficiency Scale (1 Entering, 2 Emerging, 3 Developing, 4 Expanding, 5 Bridging, and 6 Reaching). To ensure that MLLs pass the WIDA Access test, educators must take these language domains into account by creating language objectives.

Language has many different aspects, such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening. These aspects play such a huge role in daily instruction in a classroom that they are now objectives intertwined into curriculum. When teachers are writing their content objectives, they also are now held accountable to explicitly plan their language objectives. Teachers must process



how a lesson can help fulfill the language domain objectives: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. (Lenski et al., 2006). Through these objectives, MLLs as well as teachers can benefit from the skills and strategies needed during the lesson.

An example of a reading-specific objective would be “Students will be reading the passage from the text for the first five minutes of class.” This would also apply for the other domains with the objective showcasing what the students would be doing to fulfill that specific domain. (Newton et al., 2018) These objectives can be planned with an ESL teacher, ensuring that MLLs’ needs will be met. MLLs need vocabulary instruction on developing academic vocabulary, complex syntax understanding for quality writing, and reading comprehension strategies taught by all teachers in the school, not just the ESL teachers (Calderón, & Carreón, 2018). When teachers adapt pedagogy to effectively teach academic language to MLL students, this will positively affect all students in the classroom. “With students at differing levels of linguistic proficiency and understandings of content, scaffolding students’ language practices, rather than solely working toward a prescribed language objective, offers opportunities to recognize and build on student language.” (Pacheco, 2017). This can be done in a universal design in which not only helps students with disabilities, but also helps everyone in the classroom.

## **Context for Learning**

### **Understanding Communities**

Teachers must conduct the most important step when assessing their MLLs: know their students’ lives in and outside of the classroom (Von Esch, 2018). Being able to observe a student inside of the classroom is easier for teachers due to the students being in the space. Teachers can make observation notes on who the MLLs talk to in the room. This can be who

their friends are and who they choose to not have relationships with. Teachers can also see how the MLLs react when put in certain situations. This will allow the teacher to see how the student handles the situation. Teachers can also see what skills students struggle with and what skills they can apply when given certain activities (Von Esch, 2018). Through these observations, the teacher can see what kind of learner their students are while in the classroom as well as their behavior with their peers and with their schoolwork. For example, if a student is shy and keeps to themselves but excels in their schoolwork, the teacher can scaffold by starting with independent work to partner work and gradually into more group content to help the student build their self esteem in working with others.

The most important factor is the set of knowledge and experiences MLLs gain in their lives outside of the classroom, otherwise known as a student's funds of knowledge (De Jong, 2013). Students' funds of knowledge is an aspect of the students' lives that the teacher cannot control but should learn more about. A student's personality can be different in and out of the classroom. Many students go back home and must be the older siblings with many responsibilities. Others may go home and not have food on the table or a proper place to sleep. Other factors to take into consideration is the student's cultural background. Some students come from backgrounds where mothers are more present in their child's education compared to their fathers. This can also include the difference between white American culture of immediate family and other culture's definition of immediate family. For example, in white American culture, parents would be primary contacts but in other cultures it can vary from parents, grandparents, aunts or uncles. Others may come from backgrounds which affect what they can and cannot eat inside and outside of school. These are all factors that can affect their learning in the classroom as well as their growth. As a teacher, getting to know their students' lives in and

out of the classroom should be a top priority to contributing to their academic growth. If an educator does not know who their students are, how can they know what specific strategies are needed to help their student succeed in their educational journey?

### **Home Language Survey**

There are many surveys that teachers can send home with their MLLs. These surveys come with good intentions but can be detrimental to an MLLs education if written from a deficit lens. A well-known way to assess your MLLs is sending home a home language survey. A home language survey is a questionnaire that is taken by parents or guardians of the MLL student. This allows teachers to see which students will be provided with ELL services as well as getting to know the student's home language (King, K., & Bigelow, M., 2018). The survey consists of asking questions such as: what the primary language is spoken at home, has the student received ELL services before, etc. Once teachers have received this information, they can apply the answers into creating a plan that will benefit the student's growth by working with the ESL teacher. This survey can also see if the student is qualified for ELL services and what steps need to be taken after the survey is returned and filled out (King, K., & Bigelow, M., 2018).

These surveys will ask questions to help schools gain a better understanding of the students but can still be subjugated to bias as some students that may speak predominantly their native tongue at home, does not make them an ESL student. Schools may use the information given in the home language survey to place students in ESL classrooms even though students are proficient in English. Teachers can use these surveys and stray from a deficit lens or be non-judgmental by using the survey as a form of how to contact parents and what language parents are more comfortable in with communication.

## **Effective Teaching Strategies**

### **Vocabulary**

Through a classroom lens, students spend a significant amount of their time talking with their peers. This will allow them to gain conversational vocabulary but does not always benefit them in academic vocabulary. Vocabulary learning should involve students being actively engaged in activities that allow students to experience words in rich contexts. MLLs need high-quality vocabulary instruction throughout the entire day: during reading instruction, content learning, as well as with common words and phrases (Hellman, 2018). This will provide teachers with the necessary skills by planning activities which not only scaffold academic vocabulary but also help build skills students can use later. The skill of MLLs using post it notes to mark and write down unfamiliar words for teachers to review by Calderón and Carreón (2018), showcases how students can be active learners in their education. Through each lesson, there are academic vocabulary words that students need to comprehend. Through this comprehension, students will gain the knowledge of what topic is being taught and can also hold academic conversations with their peers.

The scaffolding methods must support the content objectives and must respond to the actual language objectives of the classroom to help students have a purpose of doing the activity (Pacheco, 2017). If done correctly, all students in the classroom should be affected positively. Through scaffolding of the academic language using language objectives, MLLs and non- MLLs can lean on one another and help each other's growth. Students can help their peers in skills they know and work on what they lack. When teachers have become the monitor and students have become the teachers, that is when learning has happened and is shown through students fully gaining the knowledge of the lesson as well as the academic vocabulary (Pacheco, 2017).

## **Collaborative Learning**

Placing MLLs in mainstream classrooms raises important questions about the adequacy of the preparation of mainstream teachers to work with ELL (De Jong, 2013). Most mainstream teachers have taken on the general education route, which often provides minimal if any ELL training. Teachers are infrequently given opportunities to obtain skills and strategies needed specifically for their MLL students. Most often if a course on English language education is offered, it is only one that touches briefly on working with MLLs. This still does not provide a mainstream teacher enough skills to properly teach their MLL students. An important method to use in this case would be collaborative learning. Collaborative learning is essential in the findings that MLLs can have more quality time with both teachers (mainstream and ESL) and advancing in the skills and strategies they need. Through collaborative learning, teachers and ESL teachers work together in planning curriculum, lessons, and student growth plans. These are essential as they help the two teachers overlap ideas and suggestions.

## **Co-Teaching Approaches**

Co-teaching has been defined as “two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single physical space” (Percy, 2018, p. 2). A positive outcome of co-teaching is allowing the MLLs to stay in their classroom. Through this act alone, a student will feel less isolated from their peers and will be given the same opportunities as their classmates. When students are pulled out of the classroom, their self-esteem and self-awareness might be deeply affected in the aspects that they are different from their peer and it has clearly been pointed out by taking them out of the classroom. If given the opportunity to stay in the classroom, many students will feel less detached from the classroom and will have the same opportunity to learn the same content level as their peers (Martin-Beltrán

& Peercy, 2012). As for the push-in method, MLLs might feel as if they have been pointed out as “special” to their peers. Having a specific teacher come in to help them and them only can make MLLs feel like they are inferior to their peers which is why they need another teacher. This can also make MLLs respond by choosing to not participate in learning or receiving help from their ESL teacher.

Through co-teaching, teachers will be given the opportunity to work with one another in ensuring that all content level materials are proficient in helping not only the MLL students in the room but also the rest of the class. Even when teachers do not co-teach, they can still put structures in place to coordinate their instructional efforts (Peercy, 2018). There will be days in which the ESL teacher is not able to be in the classroom, on those days, both teachers can plan the materials needed to ensure the success of the MLLs. Teachers can also take off planning days to be able to sit and plan out the curriculum together.

Through co-planning, a mainstream teacher can ask an ESL teacher for help when discussing content and lesson plans. The ESL teacher can also obtain new knowledge of content-based information. During this time, both teachers can also work on how they can co-teach during a lesson. Collaboration during a lesson can be done through the following approaches: one teacher teaches, the other teacher observes; one teacher teaches, the other teacher assists; station teaching; parallel teaching; alternative teaching; and team teaching (Peercy, 2018).

**Table 1.** Six Main Co-Teaching Models.

Model	Description
One teach, one observe	One teacher provides instruction to the large group while the other observes the teacher, a student, or a group of students for a specific purpose
One teach, one assist	One teacher provides instruction to the large group while the other circulates, supports, and assists individual students
Station teaching	In small groups, students rotate among several learning activities; often, each teacher leads a station, one station is an independent learning station, and additional stations are supported by volunteers
Alternative teaching	One teacher provides instruction to the large group while the other preteaches, reteaches, or assesses a small group of students for a short period of time
Parallel teaching	Each teacher delivers the same instruction to his or her half of the class
Team teaching	Both teachers equally deliver instruction to the large group

Table 1. Six Main Co-Teaching Models. Adapted from “Co-teaching with strategy instructions,” by G. Conderman & L. Hedin, 2013, July 26, *Intervention in School and Clinic*

According to Peercy (2018), the first and second approach, one teacher teaches, the other teacher observes; one teacher teach, the other teacher assists; can be showcased as the mainstream teacher observing the ESL teacher’s lesson and learning new skills or the other way around. This is beneficial to the teachers as they are learning from one another. While this is beneficial for students as they can see two different teaching styles. The third approach, station teaching, can be done just as described. The teacher and ESL teacher create stations in which all students can rotate from. Through these rotations, students can meet both teachers as well as have independent learning time. The fourth approach, parallel teaching, is done when students are broken into two groups and both teachers teach in two different parts of the room. Although this is beneficial, some students might feel like they are less smart than the other group. The fifth approach, alternative teaching, is done through one teacher teaching the first part of the lesson and the other teacher teaching the second part. This is like the last approach of team teaching where teachers bounce ideas off one another while teaching a lesson (p. 2).

### **Scaffolding the Content**

Teachers must also be aware of a student’s Zone of Proximity. The Zone of Proximity is what a student can do alone, with guidance and what they cannot do (Walqui, 2006). Many times, if done correctly, teachers can use what students already know to aid the growth of the skills they need guidance on and skills they have yet to obtain. Consistent scaffolding over time can help all students recognize their languages are not only validated in the classroom but also

helpful for literacy learning (Daniel, Jiménez, Pray, & Pacheco, 2019). Through Zone of Proximity, a student can slowly see their growth over time. A skill that was once hard for them to do alone, can now be done by themselves.

Students can see that their home language can also help them grow in their classrooms as well. Many times, teachers can use a student's home language as an advantage by tying in similar stories to the content being learned or similar vocabulary. In a study led by Zapata in 2016, a teacher name Susan incorporated the many different languages her students spoke into her classroom. When a new student from Japan arrived, Susan made sure to learn key phrases in Japanese as well as incorporating Japanese picture books and learning the language into her classroom. This allowed her MLL to embrace her home language as well as her other students to build curiosity and awareness of other languages and cultures (Zapata, 2016). Through this implementation, the teacher was able to show her view on students' languages. The views being that all languages should be embraced and used in the classroom and that different languages can be spoken and learned in the classroom as well, other than English.

Once students see that vocabulary in their home language can be translated into English as well, they can build their confidence in learning more academic based vocabulary. Using an MLLs home language in the classroom can also build a great classroom community. Teachers can have student present a new word in their home language to the classroom once a week to help build classroom knowledge of a student's language. Teachers can also create anchor charts where all students are able to see how words in English are said in another language. This can help other students want to gain more knowledge of other languages besides English in the classroom. Through this, MLLs can see a more positive light in knowing more than one language instead of seeing their native language as a negative (Zapata, 2016).



A great way to build a student's confidence is letting students see their growth through writing. When students begin writing at first, they use all the vocabulary they know but many times they are not academic vocabulary. Scaffolding in writing to help students understand key points as well as how academic languages can be presented in their writing (Lee, 2018). Teachers must first start off with transition wording before building onto conjunctions, content vocabulary and higher-level words. Through writing, students can also see their growth from words to sentences to paragraphs. As students build on their academic vocabulary, they can form sentences which will eventually change into paragraphs. Teachers can use this to an advantage by showing an ELL their growth in hopes that it motivates them to keep striving positively towards their academic growth.

### **Benefits for All Students**

After a teacher and ESL teacher have built the foundation of their collaboration, they can now focus on their students. All students in the classroom are important and MLLs especially need to know this. By building a classroom in which positively shows light on culture, language and academic content, all students can grow (King, K., & Bigelow, M., 2018). Through co-teaching, students can benefit from having two teachers in the classroom and twice the skills and strategies being taught (Peercy, 2018). Most times educators must remember that all students need the language objectives and not just MLLs. Through language objectives, students can see what exactly they are doing in a lesson and how the content is being presented. Most teachers need to remember that most lessons are not made just to be taught. Most lessons are successful when students are the focus and if they are learning the content. Once a teacher has changed their focus points to the students, then a lesson has been successfully taught.

Teachers must achieve this goal by preparing activities in which students are able to work in groups and can have pair discussions (Pritchard, & O'Hara, 2017). Students learn best when bouncing off ideas from one another as they are all around the same age and cognitive level. As an adult the form of teaching used can be done in ways an adult brain can process given information. Educators must teach these to students in hopes that they can digest the given information but in theory students learn best from their peers (Zhang et al., 2016). While the intentions of teaching academic vocabulary are through content, most times this approach can be done through pair discussions and other incorporated classroom strategies. As time has changed, academic vocabulary is not just learned through readings or spelling anymore. Academic vocabulary can be learned through interactive word walls, activities, etc.

Creating a universal design for a classroom would be one in such that the classroom contains two teachers, a mainstream and an ESL teacher. Both teachers' main focuses are all students and their growth throughout the school year. This is far better in comparison to using the push in or pull out methods with MLLs. Through those methods, MLLs can feel outcasted or less than their peers. These methods can also make MLLs feel as if they are not a part of the classroom and lose that sense of community when they return into the mainstream classroom.

## **Challenges**

ESL and mainstream teacher collaboration can also face challenges. These challenges could be the teachers' ability to engage with one another. Communication is very important in any aspect of life. Due to the ESL teacher and mainstream teacher working together, they both must be open to ideas related to their teaching differences and use these differences to support

their students. Other issues can stem from “lack of time for planning, communication, shared vision, willingness to discuss and work through disagreements, and lack of structural and administrative support.” (Percy, 2018). If a school were to take on collaborative instructional teaching, there needs to be effort made by teachers and administrators in order for this collaboration to be successful. Although there has been successes and challenges in this instructional approach, teachers must still work collectively to benefit their student’s educational success in academic language.

### **Conclusion**

In a perfect world, all school buildings would have an ESL teacher who would be able to provide enough time and content to help all the MLL students in the building. Each classroom and building will have enough ESL teachers in each room to help co-teach and collaborate with. Then through collaboration, the universal design can be put into place to help not only MLLs grow but all students in the room as well. However, in this world, most schools do not have enough funding or enough student count to recruit an ESL teacher into their building. Mainstream teachers should be the next ones who are able to step up because they have the skills needed. Courses and scaffoldings for MLLs should not only be taken by those who want to become an ELL teacher but should be an essential to all mainstream teachers. The future is changing every day; schools have more and more MLL students entering the education system compared to a couple years ago. Teachers, no matter what their specialty, should be able to have at least some of the skills to provide for their students. When these skills are obtained, not only will they help the MLLs in their classroom but every single one of their students will be influenced positively.

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