



## Using Multilingual Approaches to Support English Language Acquisition

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### A Note About Multilingual Approaches

A multilingual approach offers instructional strategies to supplement instruction in English and support English language acquisition. Multilingual approaches allow learners to access their full linguistic repertoire for the purposes of accelerating their English proficiency.

When implementing multilingual approaches, consider:

- Multilingual approaches should supplement instruction in English, not replace it.
- Multilingual approaches are not one-size-fits-all. Programs and instructors should carefully consider the needs and objectives of their program and learners when determining if and when to use multilingual approaches.

The **Enhancing Access for Refugees and New Americans** project aims to support adult educators in developing and delivering high-quality IELCE/IET programming in alignment with an immigrant integration approach.

**Enhancing Access Spotlights** describe and provide examples of specific aspects of IELCE/IET implementation.

- Adult education classrooms serve speakers of many languages. Consider how multilingual approaches are used to ensure that all learners have equitable access to instruction.

This spotlight explores the use of multilingual approaches for the purpose of supporting English language acquisition, shares examples of statewide approaches, and highlights strategies for program design and instruction. It is not intended as policy guidance.

### Using an Asset-Based Approach

A **multilingual approach** to Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE) design and instruction frames adults' multiple languages in the English classroom and in the community as an asset that can support English language acquisition.<sup>1</sup> In line with this asset-based approach, this spotlight uses the term **multilingual adults**, in place of commonly used terms like English learners, to refer to adults who are adding English to their repertoire of languages and literacies.<sup>2</sup>

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This product was developed by RTI International under Contract GS00F354CA/91990021F0348 with funding from the U.S. Department of Education. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, and no official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education should be inferred. This document contains examples that are provided for the user's convenience.

## Why take a multilingual approach?

Proficiency in multiple languages is an asset. A multilingual approach has cognitive, sociocultural, economic, and educational benefits for immigrants and refugees who participate in these activities, and for communities.<sup>3</sup> A multilingual approach to adult English language acquisition, including IELCE services, has many benefits, such as the following:

- **Supporting the development of English.**<sup>4</sup> Previous research has shown that the use of the home language in the classroom can lead to improved outcomes for adult learners with emerging literacy and beginning English skills for reading comprehension and oral communication in English.<sup>5</sup>
- **Encouraging multilingual adults to take advantage of their previous experiences and knowledge throughout the language learning process.** Use of experience and prior knowledge is a principle of many adult learning theories<sup>6</sup> and enhances the metalinguistic skills of multilingual adults.<sup>7</sup> A multilingual approach also aligns with objectives of the English Language Proficiency Standards in Adult Education and TESOL's Six Principles.<sup>8</sup>
- **Drawing on multilingual adults' language capabilities to prepare them to meet the increasing demand for bilingual work.**<sup>9</sup> The demand for Chinese, Spanish, and Arabic languages is especially pronounced in the finance and health care industries.<sup>10</sup> There is an ongoing shortage of bilingual teachers in many states.<sup>11</sup>

- **Addressing family literacy needs through developing and preserving the home language(s) and bringing intergenerational benefits.** For multilingual children, proficiency in the home language(s) corresponds to better home relationships in adolescence and confers linguistic and nonlinguistic advantages. Furthermore, multilingualism enhances cognitive functioning, such as resolving conflict among competing options and switching tasks.<sup>12</sup> In this way, a multilingual approach not only supports adults in their educational and economic outcomes but can also lead to benefits for multilingual families.

Moreover, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights and the U.S. Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division noted in a joint 2015 "Dear colleague" letter about Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, "We applaud those working to ensure equal educational opportunities for English learner (EL) students, as well as the many schools and communities creating programs that recognize the heritage languages of EL students as valuable assets to preserve."<sup>13</sup>

## Translanguaging and IELCE Activities

### What is translanguaging?

Translanguaging refers to the idea that individuals' language practices are not discrete units. Rather, individuals draw from all their available linguistic resources across languages and literacies, also known as their full linguistic repertoire, to respond to what is needed to communicate in a specific context.<sup>14,15</sup> The multilingual approach identified in this spotlight aims to be consistent with the key assumptions of translanguaging:

- Using multiple languages and literacies is the norm.
- Using multiple languages and literacies in the classroom is an asset.

### How can providers support translanguaging in IELCE activities?

- Create an environment that allows and encourages multiple languages. Reinforce the explanation through signage in multiple languages in the classroom space.
- Share research and information on translanguaging with multilingual adults, IELCE staff, and IELCE partners to describe why multiple languages should be encouraged in IELCE activities.

### Where can providers learn more about translanguaging?

See the following example resources to learn more about translanguaging and its impact on instruction:

- [Translanguaging: A CUNY-NYSIEB Guide for Educators](#)
- [Strategies for Teaching Adult Emergent Bilinguals: Translanguaging for Adult ESL](#)
- [Does Translanguaging Work in Adult ESL?](#)

## Taking a Multilingual Approach in IELCE

IELCE activities “include instruction in literacy and English language acquisition and instruction on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and civic participation, and may include workforce training.”<sup>16</sup> As indicated earlier, using primary languages in the classroom supports English language acquisition, and maintaining home languages has cognitive, sociocultural, economic, and other educational benefits. As such, a

multilingual approach to IELCE activities can support (1) instruction in literacy and English language acquisition, (2) civic participation, and (3) workforce-related objectives. The remainder of this spotlight illustrates how IELCE providers can leverage these benefits by establishing a multilingual approach at the state level, in program design, and in instruction.

## Considering a Multilingual Approach at the State Level

There are states that offer guidance on the use of multilingual approaches to English language acquisition. Examples of how states have supported multilingual approaches to English language acquisition include the following:

- **Provide materials in multiple languages to promote language access.** State adult education offices can support programs in developing and distributing materials, such as for recruitment, intake, and orientation, so that all multilingual adults, regardless of English language proficiency, can understand and ask questions about IELCE services. For example, Virginia makes the student intake form available in multiple languages,<sup>17</sup> and the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center has produced videos in which native speakers of commonly spoken languages explain the intake process.<sup>18</sup>
- **Offer high school equivalency programs and exams in languages other than English.** There are state governments, including Texas,<sup>19</sup> Massachusetts,<sup>20</sup> Ohio,<sup>21</sup> and Virginia,<sup>22</sup> that allow for state high school equivalency (HSE) exams such as the GED<sup>®23</sup> and HiSET<sup>®24</sup> to be taken in languages other than English. Offering HSE preparation and exams in languages other than English acknowledges the impact for multilingual adults in both increasing English proficiency and attaining a high school credential. To support instructors teaching HSE classes in Spanish,

Massachusetts' [System for Adult Basic Education Support \(SABES\)](#) has created a position that provides Spanish language professional development and coaching for instructors.

- **Build on home language literacy to support language development in multiple languages, including English.** The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Adult and Community Learning Services (ACLS) explicitly identifies why and how programs may support native language literacy alongside English language instruction: “The goal of native language literacy instruction is to support students who speak other languages to develop foundational literacy skills in their first language including reading, writing, speaking and listening, and mathematics for students who need it. ACLS requires that programs providing native language literacy instruction ensure that students receive instruction in English language acquisition.”<sup>20</sup> In particular, this practice may be beneficial for many multilingual adults with limited formal schooling, as it addresses academic needs across languages.
- **Identify existing state policy related to instruction in languages other than English.** In 2018, Minnesota’s State Department of Education removed an old, unenforced policy that did not allow for instructional services in languages other than English.<sup>25</sup>

## Designing IELCE Activities with a Multilingual Approach at the Program Level

A multilingual approach can be woven into the design of IELCE activities by supporting education and training in home languages, prioritizing community engagement that leverages multilingual adults' language capabilities, and linking IET activities and workforce preparation activities to bilingual career pathways. More details and examples of how IELCE program providers are currently implementing these strategies include the following:

- **Draw on home languages to support adult education and literacy and workforce preparation activities.** Provide opportunities for multilingual adults to build important skills through their home languages and literacies. These skills include digital literacy, workforce preparation, academic skills, and capabilities for civic engagement.

### Programmatic Strategies:

**Establish informal, multilingual, peer-learning opportunities** like [learning circles](#). Not only are learning circles a low-cost way to expand access to learners who cannot commit to more intensive classes, but they also build leadership skills and encourage peer learning. Furthermore, they have been shown to increase learner confidence in English language capabilities and digital skills. IELCE program providers could cultivate similar offerings with home language support to enhance multilingual adults' digital literacy and language skills.

**Produce instructional materials for using digital tools in multiple languages.** For example, Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School created written manuals and video tutorials on how to use the digital tools utilized in classes.<sup>26</sup> Tyson's Upward Academy offers online digital literacy tutorials in commonly spoken languages to support learners in online coursework.<sup>27</sup>

- **Prioritize community engagement that leverages multilingual adults' full linguistic repertoire.** Community-oriented efforts, such as service-learning projects, encourage multilingual adults to be part of decision-making processes about their learning or program content, goals, or procedures.<sup>28</sup> These service-learning projects can lead to improved self-confidence, digital literacy skills, content knowledge, and employability skills.<sup>29</sup> These community engagement efforts can build on multilingual adults' language capabilities and, through interaction with community members, can support receiving communities in learning more about newcomers.

### Programmatic Strategies:

**Collaborate with families to establish service-learning opportunities that take advantage of multilingual adults' language capabilities.** For example, the National Center for Families Learning Toyota Family Learning Program engaged over 500 parents/guardians (the majority of whom were multilingual adults) in learner-led projects, such as refugee donations and reading kits for families. IELCE providers could establish similar initiatives based on learner suggestions and ask learners to draw on their multiple languages and literacies to further enhance these efforts.

**Invite multilingual adults and community members to support English language**

**instruction.** IELCE programs can invite multilingual adults to become instructors, teaching assistants, tutors, or peer leaders to provide multilingual adults who are learning English, especially at beginning levels, with language support in English and home languages. For example, the English Empowerment Center in Virginia recruits bilingual or multilingual volunteers to support multilingual adults in the classroom and in developing digital literacy skills.

- **Link bilingual support for workforce preparation and IET activities to bilingual career pathways** to help meet local workforce needs. The need for bilingual workers is increasing, especially in the areas of finance and health care.<sup>10</sup> IELCE providers can collaborate with other educational institutions, local workforce development organizations, and employers to offer or expand bilingual IET activities with IELCE funds.



**Programmatic Strategies:**

**Promote multilingual adults' language capabilities as an asset to potential partners.**

St. Paul Adult Education in Minnesota partnered with its local public school district to offer a bilingual career pathway for paraeducators, benefiting not only the multilingual adults who participated in the program and secured positions in the school district but also K-12 students, who saw increased access to bilingual support and increased representation of their diverse linguistic capabilities.

**Recruit multilingual volunteers to support workforce preparation in multiple languages.**

For example, the Literacy Council of Tyler in Texas supports internationally trained professionals in a Spanish-speaking entrepreneurship class. Attendees develop a business plan in English, but the program also relies on Spanish-speaking volunteers to provide guidance and support.

**Ensure that multilingual adults' linguistic capabilities are integrated into employment**

- **searches and career pathway planning.** IELCE providers could include questions in intake and/or career navigation advising sessions to learn more about multilingual adults' linguistic backgrounds. Through connecting with other immigrant-serving organizations and local workforce development organizations, career navigators can stay updated on the landscape of bilingual work in the local labor market.

## Guiding IELCE Instruction with a Multilingual Approach

A multilingual approach can support English language acquisition, including reading comprehension and oral communication in English for beginning-level learners.

A multilingual approach can support English language instruction in IELCE activities through strategies such as (1) creating opportunities for multilingual adults who are learning English to guide their own language use, (2) using translation as an instructional tool, and (3) designing culminating projects that embed opportunities for use of multiple languages. These strategies are most effective when the value of multiple languages is shared with all IELCE instructors and multilingual adults in IELCE activities, as well as when multilingual adults feel welcome to use their full linguistic repertoire. The following section offers more detail on these three instructional strategies and includes examples of how this could look in an IELCE classroom.

- **Generate opportunities for multilingual adults who are learning English to guide language use.** The act of offering multilingual adults who are learning English the space to guide their own learning and determine how and when to use languages adheres to the adult learning principles of self-direction<sup>30</sup> and also makes space for multilingual adults to build their multilingual identity.<sup>31</sup>
- **Utilize translation as a pedagogical tool.** Translation supports the transfer of concepts, metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies, communication skills, and linguistic development (e.g., identifying prefixes, understanding syllables).<sup>34</sup>

### Instructional Strategies:

**Provide opportunities for multilingual adults to influence curriculum and shape their learning experience**, such as asking for input through surveys or generating a list of topics for study as a class.<sup>32</sup>

**Establish project-based learning opportunities** that allow multilingual adults to learn, research, and negotiate meaning in their language(s) of choice, such as the Digital Literacy Folk Stories project-based lesson.<sup>33</sup>

**Allow multilingual adults to choose when and how to use their multiple languages** in the classroom and throughout other program opportunities. Avoid designating the classroom or related instructional events as English-only.<sup>31</sup>

### Instructional Strategies:

**Organize brainstorming, discussing, and negotiating activities in homogeneous language groups** so that multilingual adults can communicate in English and other languages. Then, ask learners to report to the rest of the class in English.

**Hold one-on-one or small group conferences** for multilingual adults with the same home languages to review difficult linguistic concepts in their home language and English. After holding the conferences, have multilingual adults explain the difference to the class for added reinforcement.



- **Design multilingual culminating projects.** These projects allow multilingual adults to draw from their home language(s) to support English language development, demonstrate their full understanding of content, and support critical thinking skills.<sup>14</sup>

### Instructional Strategies:

Design projects that include products in both the home language and English, such as selecting and reading a poem in the home language and then analyzing it in English.<sup>14</sup>

Establish opportunities for multilingual adults to share their experiences while speaking their home languages and English, such as asking learners to interview each other and other speakers who share the same languages.<sup>31</sup>

## Designing IELCE Activities with a Multilingual Approach in Practice

Applying a multilingual approach impacts many aspects of designing and delivering IELCE activities. At the English Empowerment Center (EEC) in Northern Virginia, over 300 learners per year are served by IELCE and Integrated Education and Training classes and benefit from the use of a multilingual approach. EEC implements several of the strategies described in this spotlight.

**Strategy:** Invite multilingual adults or community members to support English language instruction.

**How EEC Does It:** EEC recruits and trains multilingual volunteers to translate materials, assist learners during intake, check in with absent students, teach or assist classes, and tutor small groups. The center invites learner graduates to become class aides to continue practicing their English while supporting

other learners. EEC prioritizes hiring a diverse teaching staff<sup>35</sup> and encourages native speakers of other languages to apply.

Volunteers complete a hybrid, 12-hour Adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Instructor Basics training on learner-centered, culturally inclusive, and communicative teaching principles and practices. Trainees reflect on their own language repertoire to develop an appreciation for language variety<sup>36</sup> and analyze a translanguaging classroom scenario to recognize how a multilingual approach helps educators get to know learners beyond what they can do in English and build upon their strengths and experiences.<sup>31</sup> Trainees discuss how grouping, technology, and other strategies that engage learners' own languages can create optimal conditions for learning.<sup>37</sup>



### Strategies:

- Provide materials in multiple languages to promote language access.
- Draw on home languages to support adult education and literacy and workforce preparation activities.

**How EEC Does It:** EEC intake includes multilingual and digital learning supports. At registration, translated intake forms and bilingual staff and volunteers are available. Online students get multilingual instructions on how to use Zoom.<sup>38</sup> EEC's Intensive English and Workforce Readiness program lends laptops and hotspots to support access to remote classes. Bilingual volunteers assist with new student laptop orientation. And EEC offers distance supplemental learning, such as Cell-Ed, which offers several bilingual English-Spanish courses in English as a second language (ESL), digital literacy, family literacy, and workforce prep.

**Strategy:** Allow multilingual adults to choose when and how to use their multiple languages.

**How EEC Does It:** EEC is intentional about the selection of instructional materials. EEC classes use standards-aligned adult ESL textbooks, which teachers adapt and tailor for instruction. Staff curate and spotlight supplemental resources that present content in multiple languages, such as the [Digital Skills Library](#), [Unite for Literacy](#), [Adult Ed Med](#), [Digital Literacy for Life and Work](#), and USAHello's [Afghan](#) and [Ukrainian](#) resources.

Overall, EEC is committed to providing high-quality English language instruction to its diverse learner community. EEC aims to help learners access employment and educational opportunities and more fully and equitably participate in the community.



## Next Steps

Expanding the use of multilingual approaches may require rethinking how services and instruction have typically been delivered. This checklist provides steps to explore how a multilingual approach may benefit multilingual adults participating in IELCE activities. Discuss the following checklist with colleagues and reflect on actions to take at the state, program, and classroom levels to integrate multilingual approaches.

### IELCE Activities: Multilingual Approach Checklist

**Discuss the following reflection questions with colleagues to determine how a multilingual approach can support your IELCE activities and your multilingual adult population.**

- What language and literacy assets do your multilingual adult learners bring to your IELCE activities, to their communities, and to the workforce?
- How can you leverage these linguistic strengths in the classroom and help multilingual adult learners to meet their linguistic, civic, and economic goals?

**Understand how state policies may support a multilingual approach to IELCE activities.**

- Consider checking your state Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) policy guidance and websites that show state policies about HiSET® and GED® to find your state policy about high school equivalency exams in languages other than English.
- Check your state AEFLA policy guidance, or reach out to your state adult education office, to find out how your state policies address the role of home languages in instruction and other services.

**How can you integrate multilingual strategies into your IELCE program design?**

- Community-based partnerships and learning opportunities that leverage multilingual adults' language capabilities
- Partnerships to build bilingual career pathways
- Skill-building opportunities in home languages
- Other strategies: \_\_\_\_\_

**How can IELCE instruction embed multilingual strategies?**

- Scaffolding to ensure comprehension
- Project-based learning to enhance critical thinking skills in multiple languages
- Policies and procedures that allow multilingual adults to determine which languages they would like to use
- Other strategies: \_\_\_\_\_

**Visit the resources on multilingual approaches to IELCE under Enhancing Access for Refugees and New Americans (EARN) resources:**

<https://lincs.ed.gov/state-resources/federal-initiatives/refugeesandnewamericans/ela>

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