

How Can Teachers Maximize Engagement among Multilingual Students?

The term “multilingual” is increasingly used by educators to describe students from immigrant backgrounds who are in the process of learning the language of instruction at school. This is a positive affirmation that identifies multilingual students as “haves” (speakers of many languages) rather than “have-nots” (lacking proficiency in the school language). Researchers have discovered that by encouraging multilingual students to use their home languages alongside the language of the classroom, they come to view themselves as talented and accomplished speakers of multiple languages who are more likely to engage academically, rather than feeling limited by their current abilities in the school language. In recent years, Canadian teachers have been exploring a wide variety of inclusive learning strategies and programs that leverage students’ multiple languages as enrichment opportunities for *all* students.

Here are some effective ways to integrate multilingual instructional strategies into classrooms:

- Each day, teachers invite one or two students to share a word from their home languages with their classmates and explain why they chose that word and what it means. Over time, students and teachers learn a new collection of words in different languages.
- Examples of students’ work in their home languages and in the school language are prominently displayed in school corridors and at the school entrance. This reinforces the message that students’ diverse languages are both personal and educational assets.
- School library collections have multilingual books for both students and parents to read at school and at home. School policies can ensure that libraries maintain a diverse and well-stocked selection.
- Students write and publish online dual language or multilingual stories or projects.
- Teachers invite parents and community members to the classroom to read and tell stories in community languages.
- Across subject areas, teachers encourage students to conduct research online in their home languages for class projects.
- Students collaborate with partner classes across the world or across the city to create a variety of projects involving two or more languages.

The vast majority of Canadian teachers agree that we should connect instruction to students’ lives, build on their background knowledge, and maximize their intellectual and aesthetic talents in an emotionally safe learning environment.

When we acknowledge the role of students’ home languages in their lives and explore options that build on their multilingual skills, all students learn how to work across their differences and gain appreciation for different languages and cultures – skills that are highly valuable in our increasingly multicultural and interconnected world.

For online resources and references please visit:
www.edcan.ca/facts-on-education

About the Author
Dr. Jim Cummins, Professor Emeritus
OISE/University of Toronto

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