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All the Labels I Am Inside Haven't Been Named Yet: A Guide for Educators on Labels at the Intersection of Dual Language and Special Education

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"All the colors I am inside haven't been invented yet." — Shel Silverstein

All the labels I am inside haven't been named yet.

As dual language education (DLE) and special education teachers, we work within systems that rely heavily on terminology and student labeling to provide linguistic and ability services. Each label has a history and carries its own implications regarding language and ability that intersect with race (Annamma et al., 2018). How do you portray language and ability in the way you name them? Whether consciously or unconsciously, you might be portraying a particular story about students' identity. Our words shape how students are perceived, and behind every label is a human being. So, what is really behind the label(s) we use?

We are educators in Texas, and our context profoundly impacts the way issues of labeling play out. The purpose of this piece is not to offer definitive answers but to raise issues around language and labeling for students who carry multiple institutional identities, specifically linguistic and special education labels. We start this conversation by introducing questions that guide us. Then, we explain the process of identification and labeling in educational institutions for language then ability. Finally, we discuss the intersections between linguistic and special education labels and services with some concluding ideas.

What's Behind the Label? Questions That Guide Us

Do Labels Support Students, Stigmatize Them, or Both?

One of our tensions as educators is how labels can both support and not support students. In our collective experience, labels *have supported students by*:

- ◊ providing access to DLE,
- ◊ ensuring legal protection,
- ◊ providing educators with guidance on instruction and support,
- ◊ allowing students to advocate for themselves and parents on their behalf, and
- ◊ providing students with alternative ways to describe their experiences and to understand that they are not alone.

On the flip side, labels *do not support students by*:

- ◊ preventing or limiting access to DLE.
- ◊ separating students from their peers,
- ◊ viewing a label as what students are capable of and lowering expectations,
- ◊ prioritizing special education needs over language needs and providing disjointed services, and
- ◊ stigmatizing students and negatively impacting self-perception.

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Inside this issue...

How to Ensure Our Students' Second Language Acquisition Success

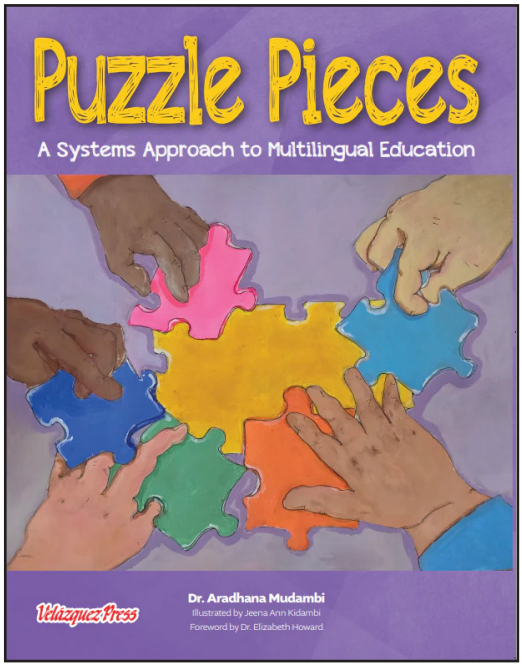
by Dr. Aradhana Mudambi— Executive Director of Multilingual Education & Founder, Mudambi Language Learning

One of my pet peeves is when teachers blame kids for their lack of achievement, especially when it comes to second language acquisition. I have heard colleagues complain that emergent bilinguals "have been here forever but are too lazy to learn English". Recently, I heard that the reason second generation students do not speak their home language is due to their "own laziness." And I have repeatedly had world language teachers tell me that kids are not interested in learning another language, so "they don't put in the effort."

Since when do students get to decide what subjects they learn or do not learn? When students "are not interested" in learning math, do we cancel math programs from their academic schedules? Or do we, as adults, ensure that they learn those multiplication tables anyway?

It is our responsibility to ensure that students become bilingual and biliterate. It is our duty to ensure that emergent bilinguals learn English at high academic levels while still building proficiency their home languages. It is our duty to defend second-generation students' access to their languages and cultures … their *patrimonio*.

If we see our roles as educators as maximizing student potential, we must ensure that all students are multilingual. According to R.L.G. (2014), bilingual adults, on average, earn nearly $75,000 more over their lifetimes than monolingual English speakers. Furthermore, a recent *Forbes* article states that multilingual individuals earn 19% more than monolingual individuals and are more likely to receive raises. Also, bilingual individuals are more competitive in an increasingly global market as more businesses need employees who can speak to a greater number of people (2023). Over half of the world's population is bilingual; if we want our students to have opportunities in the world economy, it is as much our responsibility to teach them a second language, whether it is English and/or another, as it is for us to teach them math.



Dr. Mudambi's new book offers more detail about how to build strong multilingual programs.

How do we ensure that our students become fully bilingual and biliterate? Here are five steps that schools and school districts should take:

1. Choose a Multilingual Program: There are three types of multilingual programs: English-centered, Bilingual, and World Languages. It is important to decide which program(s) your school will offer and ensure fidelity to the structures associated with them.

A. English-centered classes, also known as Sheltered English Immersion, are classes where students with varying English proficiency levels, from beginners to proficient, are mixed, and content is taught in English through the use of supportive instructional strategies that ensure comprehensible input. English-centered classes make sense when students have differing language backgrounds or when there are only a few multilingual students, even if they come from the same language background. Although the purpose of English-centered classes is to teach English, we should help emergent bilingual students find ways to develop their home languages, whether through community programs or heritage world language classes. Parents should be encouraged to keep speaking to their children in their home language and require

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that their kids respond in the same language.

B. Bilingual classes can be divided into two camps: Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) and Dual Language Bilingual Education (DLBE) classes.

a. TBE classes teach content using the home language while building students' English language skills, with the intention of eventually phasing out the home language. Because TBE classes phase out home-language instruction, they are known as subtractive programs (Escamilla et. al. 2014). TBE programs make the most sense when there is a sizable number of emergent bilinguals, but there are no DLBE classes. TBE programs should be coupled with other opportunities for emergent bilinguals to keep building their heritage language skills.

b. DLBE classes seek to make every student high achieving in all academic subjects in two languages, bilingual, biliterate, and socioculturally competent. Sociocultural competency refers to the ability to respectfully play and work with people who are different from oneself. DLBE programs typically begin in kindergarten until fifth grade, although the program may begin in early childhood and continue to graduation. The program must provide at least 50% of instruction in the non-English language and must follow separation of language guidelines outlined in the Guiding Principles for Dual Language Education (Howard et. al. 2018).

DLBE programs are the only multilingual programs proven to close the achievement gap between emergent bilinguals and monolingual English speakers. They have also proven to produce better results for all students, including third-language speakers, students with disabilities, and monolingual English speakers (Thomas & Collier, 2017). Furthermore, DLBE classes bring unity as students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds learn together. DLBE classes make the most sense when there is a sizable number of students who have the same home language, although there are DLBE programs that support students who wish to reclaim their families' heritage language.

C. World Language classes are often thought of as "foreign language classes." Typically, world language class start in middle or high school. Their selection should include heritage world languages for students who may hear the language at home but need more support speaking, reading, and/or writing.

2. Use Separation of Language, Translanguaging, and Cross-Linguistic Strategies:

Separation of languages and translanguaging have been focal points of contention among multilingual educators, but it is the intentional use of both that ensures that students learn the language of instruction (Howard & Simpson, 2024). Separation of language refers to the exclusive use of one language during instruction, whereas translanguaging is the concurrent use of multiple languages.

Separation of languages has many advantages. When teachers stay in a single language during instruction, students must put forth the effort needed to understand without relying on their home language. Therefore, when teachers couple their exclusive use of one language with scaffolding strategies that increase access, students acquire skills that support high academic achievement (Krashen, 19820.

Translanguaging also has its place in language acquisition. Many emergent bilingual students start school as simultaneous bilinguals, or students who have been introduced to two languages before the age of five (Escamilla et. al., 2014). Their linguistic repertoire consists of the two languages they use to understand and communicate their understanding. Classroom practices that prevent the use of their full linguistic

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From Silence to Voice: How AI Can Build Speaking Confidence with Teachers at the Center

by Maria Le Mura—Founder and CEO of Beyond Words VR

Every bilingual learner knows the paradox: you may understand far more than you dare to say. A student can follow a lesson, decode the meaning of a story, even think in two languages, yet when it is time to speak, silence takes over. Teachers see this every day. They also know how unevenly time is distributed: the confident voices dominate while the quieter ones remain unheard, even when their knowledge is solid.

For educators, the challenge is double. How can every learner have enough speaking practice to build confidence, when there are thirty (sometimes even more) students in the room? And how can teachers evaluate spoken language fairly and frequently without doubling their workload?

Students in London test Beyond Words' AI tools.

Artificial Intelligence offers a new possibility. Not as a replacement for the teacher, but as an endlessly patient partner for students. Still, technology alone does not solve the problem. Teachers need to be part of the process from the very beginning. Without their guidance and ownership, new tools risk creating a gap not between students, but between students and teachers themselves. With thoughtful onboarding and clear purpose, AI becomes a real amplifier: learners gain practice, and teachers gain time and insight.

Why speaking confidence matters

Confidence in speaking is not simply about fluency; it is about access. When learners hesitate to use their second language, they miss opportunities to demonstrate understanding, to interact with peers, and to grow into full participants in academic life. Teachers in bilingual programs often remark on the "invisible knowledge" that some students carry, concepts they clearly grasp but cannot bring themselves to express aloud.

Research on language anxiety confirms what teachers already know intuitively. Fear of making mistakes, of being judged, or of speaking with an accent can block participation. This silent period can last months or even years, particularly for students who do not have strong support for the minority language at home.

If confidence is the bridge between comprehension and expression, increasing confidence becomes a pedagogical priority. Without it, skills remain dormant. With it, students flourish across subjects, because speaking allows them to test ideas, take risks, and feel ownership of their bilingual identity.

The teacher's dilemma: time and equity

In an ideal world, every learner would have daily one-on-one speaking time with a teacher. Reality looks different. In a typical classroom, a teacher may hear each student speak for only a few minutes in a week. During that time, the focus is often on completing a task rather than rehearsing, repeating, or refining.

Evaluation adds another layer. Oral assessments take time to administer, time to listen, and time to score. Teachers do this willingly because it matters, but the workload is heavy, especially in programs where multiple languages and proficiency levels coexist.

Equity complicates the picture further. Confident

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speakers get more attention. Quieter students often fade into the background. This is not intentional, but it is structural. Teachers are human, time is limited, and the loudest voices fill the room.

So the dilemma is clear: students need more speaking practice and more feedback than teachers can realistically provide, at least not without sacrificing other essential parts of instruction.

AI as a patient, adaptive partner

This is where AI begins to change the equation. Imagine a partner that never tires, never judges, and never interrupts. Students can speak to an AI interface on a computer, tablet, or phone. They can repeat the same phrase ten times, try out different words, or experiment with intonation until it feels natural.

The AI provides immediate, specific feedback. Instead of a vague "good job" or a red mark on a rubric, students see which sounds were clear, which words need adjustment, and whether their answer matches the expected level. The feedback is adaptive: beginners receive simpler corrections, advanced learners are challenged with more precise input.

One teacher shared that a student who rarely spoke in class began practicing at home with the AI every evening. Within a month, that student volunteered answers aloud during group discussions. The teacher had not changed her instruction. What changed was the student's relationship with speaking. The AI gave a safe space for rehearsal, and confidence carried over into the classroom.

Reducing teacher workload without losing teacher presence

Teachers sometimes worry that AI means less human connection. In practice, it often means more. Because the AI handles the repetitive part of feedback such as pronunciation drills, basic comprehension checks, or timed responses, teachers recover valuable hours.

Instead of spending evenings listening to dozens of recordings for grading, teachers can access a dashboard showing patterns: which students improved, which errors are recurring, who needs intervention. This transforms assessment from a pile of recordings into actionable insight. The time saved can be reinvested where teachers make the greatest difference: cultural context, strategic guidance, and building relationships. No AI can replace the encouragement in a teacher's voice or the creativity of adapting a lesson to a particular group. But AI can ensure that when teachers step into that role, they do so with better information and less exhaustion.

Practical classroom integration

AI support is not a futuristic scenario. It is already happening in classrooms and homes, often with simple devices schools already have. Yet its success depends less on the tool itself than on how teachers integrate it into routines they already trust. This is actually what I've been working on for the past 5 years, and here are the most popular adoptions we've been able to observe so far.

One model is rotation. While half of the class works in groups or on written tasks, the other half practices speaking with AI. After twenty minutes, they switch. This doubles the amount of oral practice possible in a single lesson without requiring extra teacher hours. But for this to work, teachers need training and confidence in how to manage the flow, how to connect AI tasks with lesson objectives, and how to interpret the data.

Another approach is homework. Instead of written drills, students complete short AI-guided speaking tasks at home. Teachers then review a summary report rather than thirty individual notebooks. The real shift happens when teachers understand how to read these reports and how to act on them, turning raw data into meaningful support.

Finally, AI can be used as pre-practice before live interactions. Before a debate, a presentation, or a partner dialogue, students rehearse with AI. They enter the activity already warmed up, reducing anxiety and raising the quality of participation. Again, the teacher's role is central: setting the purpose, framing the activity, and debriefing with students.

These scenarios are not theoretical. Teachers implementing them report not only higher confidence among students but also smoother

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Results of the New Mexico Native American Capstone and Graduation Profile Study: Leveraging Edu-Local Goals and Values

by Wendy S. Greyeyes, Ph.D., Kim Lanoy-Sandoval, Ed.D., and Lisa Harmon, Ed.D.—Funded by Future Focused Education

The state of New Mexico has a unique and culturally distinct community. Since the settlement of the *Martínez/Yazzie v. State of New Mexico* case in 2018, there have been community and political debates regarding possible remedies to resolve the issues of educational disenfranchisement affecting New Mexico's Native American students. Two New Mexico State legislative actions were implemented that sought to build on best practices occurring in schools.

Our study is an examination of these best practices and the implementation of initiatives in schools with high numbers of Native American students. Specifically, we examined the rollout and implementation of both capstones and graduate profiles.

NiLynn Pino of Zia Pueblo examined historical trauma generated by the federal Indian boarding school experience.

On February 9, 2024, New Mexico's governor, Michelle Lujan Grisham, signed House Bill 171 changing graduation requirements for the class of 2029. This required schools and districts to develop and implement a graduate profile; a distinctive way of evaluating the ideal graduate that embeds the local communities' goals and expectations for their students. The work of building a graduate profile is of upmost importance for considering how a school approaches the inclusion of parents, mentors, communities, and leaders to help identify those expectations that are most important for New Mexico communities. This study examines the development of these capstones and to explain how schools are approaching the graduate profiles and why.

Another policy enacted by New Mexico involved the implementation of capstones, which require students to complete a chosen project approved by the school. Completion of the project includes a student performance. We uncovered some important best practices related to these capstones and provide the results of these two initiatives.

We identified three school districts to participate in this project: Cuba Independent Schools, Peñasco Independent Schools, and Santa Fe Indian Schools. Cuba Independent Schools does not operate on an Indian reservation but serves a high number of Navajo, Jicarilla Apache, and Pueblo students. The school board approved the study on December 20, 2023. Peñasco Independent Schools operates on the Picuris Pueblo. Although, there is no tribal research-review process, this project required two presentations and follow-up meetings with the Peñasco School Board, which approved this study on February 20, 2024. Finally, Santa Fe Indian School had its own internal research-review process which followed this study's application. The school approved the study on May 1, 2024. The schools' resolutions and letters of approval were submitted to the University of New Mexico's Office of the Institutional Review Board on May 15, 2024.

The outcome of the study is highly qualitative with a focus on student voices and leaders at the above-mentioned school sites. There were 18 interviewees: four school leaders, eleven students, one capstone teacher, and two policy leaders. Additional sources of knowledge came from archival educational

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materials: strategic plans, assignments, rubrics, capstone projects, and graduate profiles for all the schools. This article will focus on select perspectives from the longer report, which will be available on the *Future Focused Education* website (*https://futurefocusededucation.org/*).

Designing the Capstone Framework

The Santa Fe Indian School (SFIS) had a rich and research-focused capstone curriculum. It was uniquely structured around community engagement and community building. Each capstone offered a framework that would center the student's project on a primary community focus; students had the option to select their area. The students were also required to select a foundational topic related to their schools' graduate profile. Additionally, the students had to conduct research that identified a statement of the issue (similar to a problem statement), a historical overview, legislative impacts, a literature review, and several global connections to construct a comparative analysis. The students concluded with an action plan that directly linked to the problem statement and could involve family, community, or student body members. Finally, to ground the capstone into the personal lives of students, they identified a hero that contributed significantly to their goals and outlook. Throughout the course, the teacher incorporated mentors from the school faculty, staff body, and family members to evaluate the students' progress.

Throughout the yearlong course, the SFIS teacher, Dr. Valerie Grimley, built a powerful network of speakers, research visits, and final presentations that included opportunities for younger classmen and women to observe. Students at the school were aware that during their senior year, they must complete the Senior Honor's Project (SHP), also recognized as their capstone project, and present it to the entire student body. She describes the effort to encourage students to keep an open mind to the possibilities of the capstone project. She recalls her conversation with one student.

> *"Oh, man, I have to do an SHP." I would ask, "Why is it such a pain? What's the burden? Tell me." She replied, "It's a lot of work. You have to read and you have to do research. Then at the end of the year, you make us stand in front of everybody." I'm like, "But you're going to do that one day."*
>
> *I really had to take a step back and tell them, "You do this already when you're participating in your annual feast day and you're dancing in front of everybody… When … you're attending an event and someone is praying, and maybe it's your dad as the governor or the war captain, or maybe it's your uncle; you're already doing that. When you're at the kitchen and you're setting the table for a traditional event and you're feeding tribal leaders that are all seated at your table, you're already doing that."* (Grimley Interview)

Overall, it's clear that building the legitimacy of engagement with the capstone required Dr. Grimley's deep connection and rootedness with her students. The relationships she developed with the student was exemplified in their trust in her. The feedback from students exemplified their understanding of the capstone and its deep connections to themselves and their work.

Enacting the Capstones

Student reflections identified their overall impressions as they examined the capstones at the end of the school year. Their foundational topics stemmed from the graduate profiles. One student, April, examined the history of student anxiety about school. Another student, Denisha, described how architecture shaped ideology and meaning in buildings.

> ***Global Connections:*** *I learned definitely a lot about the history of anxiety, from times when they first started getting recorded in ancient Greece all the way to the different methods that they used [to treat it], different things that it was called, and when the actual term anxiety disorder started to be created and used regularly. I also just learned the statistics that happen in schools, like the [number] of students who are feeling depressed and anxious, and the [number] of students missing school because of those feelings and emotions, and those statistics. I also got feedback on how my own classmates and my own students here feel about anxiety ... (April* Rosetta, Student)
>
> *It was both fun and challenging at the same time, it was really interesting to see like with*

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What if Personal, Home, and School Labels Don't Match?

Tensions arise between the ways schools, families, and students identify and use (or not use) school labels. Labels often do not reflect families' or children's conceptualizations of language and/or disability (Cioè-Peña, 2018). For example, in a study exploring how secondary Latino/a students self-identify in Texas, the researcher found that students did not like the term "emergent bilingual" because they felt that they *were* bilingual, not "emergent" (Zapata, 2025). Labels, then, should be understood as tools to provide services rather than identity markers. An identity approach supports individuals' agency to take up, or refuse linguistic and disability labels. By separating institutional labels from identity labels and engaging students and families in conversations about how they identify, educators can both meet institutional requirements while affirming the agency and self-understanding of students and families.

Person-first vs identity-first language?

Have you ever heard someone use the phrases, "the ESL students," or the "SPED students?" Are these phrases you may have found yourself using in your educational journey? We often utilize language that is handed down, and not necessarily with ill intent. Nonetheless, this language contributes to further stigmatization of individuals based on program or disability. Examples of person-first language are "the students in the ESL program" and "the students receiving special education services." Using person-first language humanizes the individual, avoiding defining the student by a program label.

Consideration must also be exercised when speaking to an individual who prefers identity-first language. Often, using identity-first language is a way for a community (or an individual) to reclaim their disability (Taboas et al., 2022). The phrase, "autistic person" utilizes identity-first language; person-first language construction is "a person with autism." When in doubt, ask the individual or group members what identifying language they prefer.

Educator Policy Processes & Labels
Language Education Processes and Labels

U.S. policies regarding the education of ELs have evolved over the years, due in great part to advocacy efforts associated with the Civil Rights Movement and Chicano/Mexican American activism (Donato, 1997; Trujillo, 2014). The legal requirements are currently specified in Title III of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015). Linguistic support program models vary throughout the United States but fall into two overarching types: English as a Second Language (ESL) and bilingual education (Crawford, 2004; Gándara & Escamilla, 2017). The terminology used in programs and processes for English learner (EL) students varies by state.

All states are required by the U.S. Department of Education (2016) to provide families with a Home Language Survey (HLS) when they enroll their child for the first time in a public school. The questions and name of the HLS document vary slightly from state to state, but all are intended to identify children who may need to be assessed for English proficiency (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Schools must designate procedures for the identification, placement, and monitoring of EL students in bilingual or ESL programs.

The long history of language education connects to the history of language labeling and may include the following:

English Learner (EL)/English Language Learner (ELL)

Multilingual Learner (ML/MLL)

Emergent Bilingual (EB)

English Proficient (EP) (*used for students who speak English at home and EL students after reclassification.*)

DLE educators and researchers have used alternative ways to identify and discuss students with diverse language backgrounds. These alternative terms are often used in an effort to move away from deficit-based language.

Culturally and linguistically diverse students (CLD) (Cummins, 1984)

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Identify by students' dominant language(s) (i.e., Spanish speaker, Arabic speaker, bilingual Spanish/English speaker) (Center for Applied Linguistics, n.d.)

Bilingual learner or Dual language learner (DLL) (Kovelman et al., 2008)

Linguistically minoritized/marginalized students (Martínez, 2018)

Special Education Processes and Labels

Special education policies have also been developed over time to ensure that schools provide appropriate education plans and protections for students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004), the founding special education law, mandates that "All children with disabilities... are identified, located, and evaluated," (IDEA, 2004). Schools, then, are required to identify children with disabilities and provide them with services. The thirteen disability categories under IDEA and commonly used by school districts are:

- intellectual disability (ID)
- hearing impairment (including deafness) (HI)
- speech or language impairment (SLI)
- visual impairment (VI)
- emotional disability (ED)
- orthopedic impairment
- autism (AU)
- traumatic brain injury (TBI)
- other health impairment (OHI)
- specific learning disability (SLD)
- deaf-blindness (DB)
- multiple disabilities (MU)
- developmental delay (DD) (IDEA, 2004)

Other key requirements under IDEA are the provision of a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE; IDEA, 2004). Children suspected of having a disability receive a full and individual evaluation (FIE) to determine eligibility for special education under the thirteen categories. If they are eligible, an individualized education program (IEP) is created to meet their needs and make progress in the general education curriculum (IDEA, 2004).

Alongside the thirteen federal disability categories defined by IDEA, researchers, educators, students, and families also use a range of alternative terms to describe disability or students with disabilities. It is always a good idea to ask what a group or individual prefers:

- Neurodiversity/neurodivergent (*thought to exist on a spectrum*) (Singer, 2017; Dewar, 2024)
- Dis/ability (*an active process rather than a descriptor*) (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004; Goodley, 2014)
- Learning differences (Fofaria, 2019)
- Students with special needs (Gernsbacher, et al., 2016)
- Differently abled (Dewar, 2024)
- Exceptional children / Exceptional learners (Council for Exceptional Children, 2021)

The Intersection of Dual Language Education and Special Education

ELs have historically been both over- and under-represented in special education, depending on factors such as age, location, and disability category (Artiles et al., 2005; Ortiz et al., 2020). Schools often fail to meet the needs of children at the intersection of DLE and special education, due to the siloed nature of the two systems. ELs with disabilities do not fit neatly into just one institutional category and, as a result, may experience inadequate services due to the lack of qualified bilingual special education teachers, scheduling conflicts between programs and services, and misconceptions about the appropriateness of DLE for children with disabilities (Kangas, 2017; Muñoz-Muñoz et al., 2022).

Processes for ELs with disabilities are not clearly established in policy or law, though approximately a third of states have developed guidance documents (Baker et al., 2024). Educators are also working to strengthen alignment so that the two traditionally separate processes acknowledge one another. For example, Texas requires public schools to form a Language Proficiency Assessment Committee (LPAC) with an administrator, a

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bilingual/ESL teacher, and a parent of an EL to collectively make identification, placement, and reclassification decisions for individual EL students, and has issued guidance for collaboration between the LPAC and IEP team (which they refer to as the Annual, Review, and Dismissal, or ARD committee) (Texas Education Agency, 2025).

DLE administrators can foster a culture of collective responsibility for ELs with disabilities (Kangas, 2017). This could entail training educators in evidence-based culturally and linguistically sustaining and special education practices, as well as scheduling common planning time for special education teachers and bilingual/ESL teachers to collaborate (Lopes-Murphy, 2020). At the classroom level, educators can adopt pedagogical approaches that embrace intersecting identities, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL; CAST, 2024), translanguaging pedagogy (García et al., 2017), and Translanguaging Universal Design for Learning (TrUDL; Cioè-Peña, 2022).

These are terms used in educational policy to describe students at the intersection of bilingual/ESL and special education:

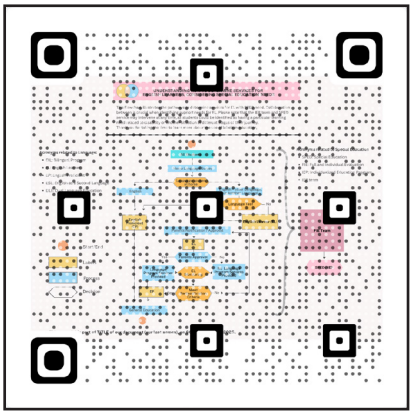
- Dual-identified / Dually identified (*recently used to describe students requiring both language and special education services)* (Carnock & Silva, 2019; TEA, 2025)
- English learners with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2024)

Researchers have utilized a variety of additional terms to describe ELs with disabilities:

- Culturally and linguistically diverse exceptional (CLDE) children (Collier, 1983)
- Emergent bilinguals labeled as disabled (EBLAD) (*coined to emphasize that institutional labels may not match parents' views of their children's ability)* (Cioè-Peña, 2018)
- Emergent bilinguals with disabilities (Lopes-Murphy, 2020)
- Multilingual learners with disabilities (Colón & Alsace, 2022)

Though it can be daunting to keep track of the many terms used to describe ELs with disabilities, the many labels are also a sign of increased awareness of these students' existence and interest in improving their educational services.

[QR code to graphic: Understanding How Schools Determine Services for English Learners with Disabilities https://shorturl.at/lZa9b]



Discussion & Conclusion

"Del derecho al hecho hay mucho trecho" - Anónimo

The discussion of terminology and labels in education is far from merely semantic; it has tangible consequences for students' educational trajectories, access to services, and self-understanding. The challenge, then, is to hold space for both: to use institutional labels pragmatically while simultaneously decentering them as markers of identity. As educators, we must engage critically with terminology across contexts and question whether it reflects families' and children's own conceptualizations of language and ability. This gap between intention and practice urges us to ask: What does it mean to rely on a label? Who benefits and who is excluded by its application? How might educators foster conversations that honor families' and students' agency to take up, resist, or redefine these terms? Cultivating a conscious use of labels when referring to our students is crucial to our role as educators.

References and notes for this article can be found at https://dlenm.org/educator-resources/. Scroll to Soleado Newsletters and click on Winter 2025.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repertoire limits their access to content (García, 2009).

Regardless of the program model, teachers should incorporate intentional pedagogical translanguaging where teachers allow for the intentional use of both languages. In bilingual and world language classes, dedicated time should be allocated for cross-linguistic connections (Howard & Simpson, 2024; Beeman & Urow, 2013)).

Teachers must carefully decide when to ensure the separation of languages and when to allow for translanguaging. In general, teachers stay in the language of instruction while students work and talk together in the language that best supports their learning. Teachers should encourage all whole-class sharing to be in the language of instruction and offer appropriate support. Curricular material and warm-up activities in the home language may offer limited support. Instructional materials used in DLBE classes, however, should be exclusively in the language of instruction, although their complexity may be modified for students new to the language.

Finally, students in world language classes benefit when the teacher remains in the language 90% of instructional time and provides scaffolds so that the students are supported in understanding and producing in that language. The remaining 10% of instructional time may include opportunities for translanguaging and metalinguistic activities that highlight cross-linguistic awareness.

3. *Challenge students.* Teachers of multilingual students often worry that they may be stressing them too much or that students have experienced too much trauma to be able to handle rigorous work. As educators, we sometimes give students so much help that they engage in learned helplessness and become dependent learners with little faith to learn (Hammond, 2015). The Yorkes-Dodsen Law of Arousal demonstrates that there is an optimal amount of stress students need to learn efficiently (Mudambi, 2024). I refer to it as the Goldilocks level of challenge (Mudambi, 2025). So, push each student to the next level of linguistic and content attainment, such that each child must struggle both in language and academics to succeed, but temper this push with needed support so they don't give up. Then, remove the scaffolds when the work becomes too easy. It's the only way they will grow!

4. *Provide access points for students.*

It is imperative that we provide students access points through comprehensible input, scaffolds, schema-building activities, and clearly defined objectives. Without access points, the work becomes too challenging, and students will naturally check out.

Ensure comprehensible input for language learners by using gestures to support comprehension of key vocabulary, slow down your speech, use visuals and modeling, among other strategies (Echevarría et. al., 2013; Krashen, 1982). Provide scaffolds such as graphic organizers, word banks, and sentence stems. Carefully chosen, relevant warm-up activities that build and/or activate background knowledge are necessary (Hammond, 2015). This may include playing authentic songs that are related to the content, having them sing along, and analyzing the song with them. Furthermore, lived language and content objectives can build access points for students. Remember, every student should only get the amount of support that they need. As students' proficiency levels grow, those supports are removed.

5. *Elevate the status of the non-English language.* By the time students reach upper elementary and middle school, even those who are proficient in the non-English language choose not to speak in the language because society tells them that only English has status. Some schools create multilingual bulletin boards, ensuring that the language is predominantly featured. Others say the Pledge of Allegiance in all program languages. While these activities are important, we must have direct conversations with students about how their bilingualism is a superpower. These conversations are important regardless of the

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program model.

In fact, teachers in English-centered classes should praise their students for their multilingualism and encourage their monolingual students to add to their linguistic repertoires. They also need to be careful that their day-to-day actions do not contradict this praise. There will always be those who will try to make less of their linguistic and cultural identities. It's important that we teach our students how to defend their right to their languages and cultures and stay true to who they are.

Following these suggestions will help your students achieve academically and linguistically. To learn more about how to ensure students' success regardless of program model, my book, *Puzzle Pieces, A Systems Approach to Multilingual Education* (Velázquez Press, 2025), offers more detail about how to build strong multilingual programs. Because in the end, it's our job as adults to make sure our students graduate as multilingual individuals.

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classroom dynamics. Learners who were hesitant suddenly have something to contribute, and group discussions feel more balanced. Crucially, these teachers emphasize that they themselves felt supported, not replaced, in the process.

The future role of VR

While AI can be deployed immediately with existing devices, VR remains a powerful complement for schools that have the resources. Virtual reality adds immersion: students not only practice sentences but inhabit the situation. Ordering food in a virtual café or presenting in front of a simulated audience increases realism and prepares learners for authentic encounters. However, VR should be seen as an extension, not the starting point. The core shift, confidence through repeated judgment-free practice, is already possible with AI alone. In that sense, AI democratizes speaking practice, while VR enhances it for those who can access it.

The impact: confidence, equity, and efficiency

The combined effect of AI practice is visible in three areas. First, student confidence rises. Learners who once avoided speaking begin to volunteer. They may not be flawless, but they are audible, and that is progress.

Second, equity improves. Every learner, regardless of background, receives the same opportunity to practice. Those without exposure to the target language at home finally have a space to catch up. Third, efficiency increases. Teachers no longer carry the impossible burden of evaluating every utterance. Instead, they monitor progress, intervene strategically, and devote energy to the human dimensions of teaching.

Conclusion

Building speaking confidence is not an abstract goal; it is the doorway to equity in bilingual education. When learners are too anxious to speak, their knowledge remains invisible, their progress slowed, their participation unequal. AI, thoughtfully integrated, changes that equation. It gives each student unlimited practice, tailored feedback, and the chance to hear themselves succeed.
Yet we must also recognize that confidence matters for teachers too. Introducing AI without supporting educators risks leaving them behind, creating stress rather than relief. Training, time to experiment, and a sense of ownership are as essential as the technology itself.

When teachers are on board, the benefits multiply. Freed from repetitive evaluation tasks, educators can focus on cultural guidance, deeper instruction, and the human connection that no technology can replace. VR may extend this practice into fully immersive environments for schools that have the resources, but the core change is already here: AI makes speaking practice accessible anywhere, on a computer or phone, for every learner, guided by teachers who feel included rather than sidelined.

What if we imagined a future where both learners and teachers gained confidence together, making bilingual classrooms places where every voice is heard?

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my global connections. It was really interesting to find …what other countries that are rich of culture and have a deep history behind them, what they're doing to maintain those structures that are used to identify their cultural heritage or traditions. And although it was really challenging, I really enjoyed it. (Denisha Padilla, Student, San Felipe and Santo Domingo).

In terms of the foundational topics, another student examined historical trauma generated by the federal Indian boarding school experience. Here, NiLynn shows the resiliency of the Pueblo people.

Dr. Valerie Grimley of SFIS built a powerful network of speakers and research visits to support her students.

Health/Family/Community: *So, working on this project has brought a lot of views in different ways about our school and how prevalent it is and how strong our Pueblo people were back then, and even now. … just looking at the history of boarding schools and why it was set and made for us. It's really tragic, but looking forward and how we can persevere through all that trauma that our people face. …how we can really focus on having a better life for our future generation. So, … it's a lot, and I really love the topic of how I'm able to speak about historical trauma, which is something not really talked about, but yeah, also the healing part of it, too. Yeah, it's been a big process of how I can really identify the truth of what happened here but also tell it in a really respectful way where all students are able to understand. …also understand that it's something that happened here, and we can't simply ignore it, because that's one way you can't just push off feelings or you can't push off something bad that happened to you. You really have to focus on healing it.* (NiLynn Pino, Student, Zia Pueblo)

The students' perspectives and experiences clarified the impact, recognizing the lessons learned from the capstones and the integration of the graduate profiles. The students also highlighted recommendations for other students planning a capstone project.

I think I would just share that it's really something that takes a lot out of you, and when you're all finished up with it, it's really something beautiful to look back on. This is really where all the long nights of stress and hard work go …. (Dontrell Aguilar, Student)

Pick something you're passionate about because the more passionate you are to learn it, the more passionate you're able to share it and teach others what you know about it. (Amara Moquino, Student)

In conclusion, the overall study shows how the capstone project, aligned to the graduate profile, can create a distinctive educational experience for students. This study supports research that indicates that students who cultivate high levels of self-awareness are not only more emotionally resilient but also better equipped to navigate complex social situations, which is essential for meaningful interactions within their communities (Buchan et al., 2022; Simbolon et.al 2024).

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