

Lead the Way to Literacy

# LEVERAGING LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY THROUGH FOUR PILLARS

By Dr. Barbara Mondloch

The goal of every lesson is to have students leave different than when they entered their classroom. When a lesson is successful, there is a change in the student—they may think differently, have new insights, develop curiosity or new interests, and acquire new skills. If we haven't caused a change, we haven't taught them. A solid research base illuminates many ways in which bilingualism and biliteracy benefit students including, but not limited to, providing cognitive, academic, and social advantages (ACTFL, n.d.). However, language acquisition takes time, so we must leverage every moment of instruction to maximize results. What educators do in the classroom matters. To ensure our students reap the rewards of proficiency with a second language, we connect with students via four pillars: cultural engagement, purposeful learning, immersive learning, and academic rigor.



## ► CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

How do students use language to engage in a way that cultivates cultural competence and understanding? Creating cultural engagement may begin with building on students' understanding of their own identity and culture(s) while deepening a connection to others'. The World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages describe how learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the practices and products of a culture and the cultural perspectives. Students benefit from reflecting on how their own cultural experiences have shaped them as they explore and explain other cultures.

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Cultural engagement lends itself to higher-order thinking as students investigate and analyze the way products, practices, and the target language express perspectives. Today, more than ever, educators have access to a variety of resources to foster authentic cultural engagement. Cross-cultural proficiency helps students interact effectively, avoid pitfalls, appreciate differences, and enjoy broadened world views. Engaging students in authentic communication with heritage speakers can be one of the most meaningful and motivating experiences for language learners. It creates interpersonal connections, deepens understanding and appreciation of "the other," and provides a natural context to use their new language, the ultimate purpose for learning a language.

## ► PURPOSEFUL LEARNING

"Why are we doing this? How will this help me? Will I be able to do it?" Even when students are not asking these questions out loud, the brain naturally looks for connections between new learning, past experiences, and future value. Students benefit from understanding the trajectory of learning—how today's lesson builds on past learning and prepares them for future experiences.

Students need to see the purpose because, when we get right down to it, students are volunteers (Schlechty, 2005). They learn when they are motivated to learn. The formula for motivation is value x expectancy for success (Sprick, 2009). Most of us have experienced studying for a test and then promptly forgetting the information because we didn't see the value in it. Similarly, we can think of a time that a task seemed so difficult and daunting that we didn't think we could do it, so we didn't even try. For optimal learning, students need a purpose that they value and the belief that they can achieve the goal. We want students to know that they are learning a new language to be able to communicate with others. Our brains are wired to be social (Cozolino, 2013) and we can capitalize on that need for interaction and connection in the language classroom. Each lesson is designed to help students understand and speak, read and write in the target language—so they can interact with others, a basic human need, and enjoy the multiple benefits of bilingualism and biliteracy.

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Teachers help students understand the purpose by making each activity and learning experience relevant and meaningful to students and connecting to their interests. Content is provided in context and serves a function. All students and teachers should be able to answer the questions: What are we learning? Why are we learning it? How will we know when we've got it? (DuFour, Eaker, DuFour, & Many, 2006)

These and other questions pique student interest. The brain is more receptive to questions about new knowledge than it is to answers (Jensen, 1998). Teachers can build on this by posing essential questions at the beginning of each lesson or unit and referring back to them periodically. Questions of the day and community circles build cohesiveness, ensure all students' voices are heard, and are a great platform for integrating culture. Finally, ensure students know how to ask questions so that they can engage in meaningful dialogue and seek answers to their wonderings.

A surefire way to create relevance for students is to make their learning personal. What educator hasn't been challenged by a class that won't stop talking? Students, like most people, like to talk about themselves and express their preferences. Give them opportunities to personalize the content, share their likes and dislikes (for example rank chores, review music, food or literature, write Yelp-like reviews of classroom activities), and express their emotions. Allow and expect students to engage in collaborative conversations to make meaning and solve real-world problems from the practical, such as ordering in a restaurant or using a subway system, to the consequential, such as addressing the issue of plastics in the oceans or discrimination. Hooking into students' emotional pathways through stories, analogies, and moving experiences creates strong connections in the brain (Pink, 2005; Jensen, 1998). When students know the purpose for their learning, they are more likely to volunteer their attention and participation.

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## ▶ IMMERSIVE LEARNING

How do we create a context in which the new language comes to life for students? We immerse them, so when they walk into the classroom, they transition into the world of the new language. Almost all interactions are in the target language, as if there were no other option, as is often the case for our students moving into English. Negotiating meaning is reinforced and celebrated in a safe learning environment where mistakes are treated as an opportunity to learn. Students use circumlocution and nonverbal communication (gestures, visuals, facial expressions) in lieu of resorting to their first language to be understood. In the position statement on use of the target language in the classroom, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) recommends at least 90% of instruction and interaction take place in the target language at all levels of instruction (ACTFL, 2010). Immersing students in the target language accesses the brain's natural pathways for language acquisition, using the same successful approaches that allowed us to acquire our first language (Krashen, 1988).

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In addition to developing language proficiency, using the target language for instruction forces students to attend more closely. It piques their curiosity. They are more alert when they have to be detectives to make meaning. High levels of student engagement increase learning (Hattie, 2009) and decrease discipline issues due to off-task behaviors. Teachers know they are on track when at least 90% of students are engaged at any given moment and each student is engaged at least 90% of the

Language acquisition occurs when input is comprehensible and includes language slightly higher than the students' current level. In language acquisition theory, this is known as  $i + 1$  (Krashen, 1988). If you are having trouble staying in the target language, increase contextual clues with props, visuals, gestures, and examples; break your content into smaller communicative chunks; and provide more practice before moving on. Students need opportunities to process and use language in order to make it their own.

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## ► ACADEMIC RIGOR

How do we ensure students are challenged and cognitively engaged in language learning? We want them to go beyond surface level knowledge by challenging students to be reflective thinkers who engage in a persistent quest to construct complex understanding through relevant classroom experiences. In any content area, there are prerequisite skills needed to allow students to access higher-level thinking and deep cognitive-engagement, as seen in the levels of Bloom's Taxonomy and Webb's Depth of Knowledge. Surface-level knowledge is necessary to develop foundational skills, but we must achieve the ultimate goals of deep learning and transference, learning that can be accessed and applied independently in a variety of settings. Ultimately, we want students to be able to use what they've learned to create something novel. When students take ownership of the content, they can personalize it and use it "to become the catalyst for continued learning (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2016, p. 107)."

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To ensure students carry their share of the cognitive load, be judicious about the amount of "teacher talk," and ensure all students have multiple opportunities to visibly respond (orally, in writing, physically, etc.) throughout instruction. The brain is not designed for continuous learning—learning is more likely to become permanent when students are processing and reflecting (Jensen, 1998). Students should be actively working, rather than passively listening, even during teacher-led instruction.

Hold all students accountable through equitable participation. While calling on individuals is useful for checking for understanding, it can also be an opportunity for others to check out. Avoid asking "Who can tell me...?" and calling on raised hands, because the students who already know are the usual volunteers. When only one person is talking, other students may opt out from attending. Instead, ensure equitable participation and turn-taking by frequently allowing students to talk with partners or small groups before sharing with the large group. Calling on raised-hands isn't necessary because all students should have something to contribute. When a student can't respond or responds incorrectly, come back to them, after they have the opportunity to hear or find the information, so that they have both the responsibility to stay engaged and the opportunity to be successful (Lemov, 2015).

Hooking into a student's individual interests and delivering appropriate rigor to a wide range of learners is a constant challenge for educators. Each student comes to us with diverse needs—at different levels of proficiency and with their own history of success and failure. We face the Goldilocks challenge—when the work is too easy, students get bored and check out or distract others. When the work is too hard, students may get overwhelmed, shut down, or act out—some would rather look defiant than "dumb." The trick is to find the "just right" spot for students.

Teacher clarity is essential and, as documented in Hattie's meta-analysis, has a high effect-size for improving outcomes. Having a plan to differentiate practice and support can help all learners to move to the next level. Provide optional scaffolding for those who need it (for example anchor charts, sentence starters, sentence frames, and word banks) and enrichment opportunities for students who are ready to go deeper. Remember, all scaffolding is meant to be removed when the time is right. Read your audience and pace lessons according to students' cues. Peer tutoring, partner work, and other collaborative conversations have a solid evidence-base (Hattie, 2009) and give all students an opportunity to participate and contribute to a vigorous learning environment.

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As educators, we meet students where they are when they walk into our classroom, and we provide instruction and experiences to give them new tools, skills, and insights, so that when they leave they have profited from our instruction. Fostering bilingualism and biliteracy as students move into English and/or move beyond English into another language has measurable, positive outcomes. Leveraging cultural engagement, purposeful learning, immersive learning, and academic rigor helps us maximize our impact. Our diverse and complex learners may not get to the same spot at the same time, but when each student shows growth and makes it to the next level because of your instruction, it's time for celebration.



## BARBARA MONDLOCH

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Dr. Barbara Mondloch is a teacher, leader, and passionate advocate for creating equitable access to high-quality language-acquisition opportunities. With deep scholar-practitioner roots, she has professional experience in rural and urban districts, elementary and high schools, and has taught courses at Pacific Lutheran University to students earning their World Languages and/or English Learner teaching endorsements.

During her eighteen years as a high school Spanish teacher, Barbara taught Level 1 through A.P. Spanish and every level in between. In 1984 she launched her career in (then rural) Sandy, Oregon, where she wore many hats as the only Spanish teacher, Spanish club advisor, Speech and Debate coach, and cheerleader advisor. In 1988, Barbara returned to Western Washington where she taught high school Spanish in Franklin Pierce Schools, a diversity-enriched district near Tacoma, Washington, where nearly 75% of the students live in economically challenging conditions. Passionate about the benefits of language acquisition for all, Barbara wanted to create more opportunities for elementary students to access languages, although there was not a budget for such a program. This prompted her to capitalize on a valuable resource, her students. She created and implemented a Foreign Languages in the Elementary Schools (FLES) program where she trained high school students to teach in two local elementary schools. Elementary and high school students alike benefited from the positive experience. The program eventually became the topic of her master's thesis "Implementing an Elementary FLES program on a Shoestring Budget."

In 2002, after completing her master's degree and earning her principal's credentials at Pacific Lutheran University, Barbara became an elementary principal where she could continue to work closely with students, provide leadership and professional development for adults, and pursue her goal of increasing early access to bilingualism, biliteracy, and cultural proficiency in her district.

Barbara's passion for and commitment to language education extend beyond the schoolhouse. She co-authored successful middle and high school Spanish programs published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, including *¡Avancemos!* and *¡En Español!*, and contributed to other language publications including Lingo, FORUM, Foreign Language Annals, and The Language Educator.

Barbara completed her Doctorate at Washington State University in 2012. Her dissertation was entitled "Elementary Language Immersion: Lessons for Practitioners From Case Studies in Five States." Barbara treasures the rich and rewarding experiences of serving on boards of professional associations for language educators. She served as a board member, and eventually president of

the Washington Association for Language Teaching (WAFLT), and the Pacific Northwest Council for Languages (PNCFL). In addition, she had the distinct honor of serving on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) board from 2006–2012. In 2010, as president-elect, she became a member of the Executive Committee, served as president in 2011, and completed her term as past president in 2012.

Barbara’s interactive presentations at numerous local, regional, and national conferences on research-based strategies to enhance language acquisition have been well-received, and, she has been humbled by numerous awards throughout her career. As a teacher, she received Washington state’s Christa McAuliffe Award for Excellence in Education. She was named Teacher of the Year by the Washington state chapter of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP). Barbara received the 2009 Inspirational Leadership Award from WAFLT and was awarded the PNCFL 2010 Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Teaching of World Languages in the Pacific Northwest. Most recently, in 2015, Barbara was given an Excellence in Education award from Franklin Pierce Schools.

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