AN EXAMINATION OF ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM LANGUAGE POLICIES

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ABSTRACT

Multilingual students are subject to various language policies in American classrooms. Some classroom language policies encourage multilingualism and are, therefore, additive in nature, while others are subtractive and lean toward an English-only approach. This quantitative study examined explicit and implicit classroom language policies of elementary classrooms that either encourage or restrict multilingual students' use of their home language for learning. By surveying elementary teachers who instruct multilingual students in elementary schools in the Midwest, I identified classroom practices that contribute to additive or subtractive multilingualism. Survey results indicate that teachers want to meet the diverse learning needs of their students but do not always have the resources or knowledge to do so. Even when official policies are in place, teacher implementation of the policy affects English learners' ability to develop language proficiency.

Keywords: Classroom language policies, translanguaging, additive and subtractive multilingualism, emergent bilinguals, language policy implementation, culturally responsive teaching

ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM LANGUAGE POLICIES

Why should home language use be restricted to the home? Multilingual students bring their knowledge of two or more languages with them wherever they go. Some teachers know how to utilize this linguistic power, while others do not understand how to use it to its full advantage. Language policies of all kinds exist on paper or in practice. Classroom implementation of such policies varies widely where students are developing proficiency in English (Chang-Bacon, 2022). As the number of English learners (ELs) continues to rise in my area, I asked local teachers how they meet the needs of this group and how they use the linguistic assets of ELs for learning.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 mandates that schools provide quality language assistance programs for ELs so they can participate meaningfully and equally in educational programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In response, school districts introduced whole-school language policies in the late 1960s (Vanbuel & Van den Branden, 2021). These policies aimed to provide equal rights for ELs and their monolingual peers. Current language policies fall under one of three categories: 1) language-as-problem, 2) language-as-right, and 3) language-as-resource (Ruiz, 1984). When one regards language as a problem, the focus is on monolingualism, and language learning becomes subtractive in nature. English, therefore, replaces a student's home language over time. Language, when understood as a basic human right, supports equal access to educational experiences in languages that emergent bilingual students understand. When language is valued as a resource, learning becomes additive in nature and encourages two or more languages to develop simultaneously. Proficiency development in one language supports the other language.

Most schools in the U.S. have monolingual teachers working in educational systems that reflect monolingual ideologies whose students receive instruction in English-dominant settings (Bacon, 2020; Shin, 2013). Teachers who have had prior language learning experience or teacher training in meeting the needs of ELs are more likely to implement strategies based in additive approaches. Teachers with no such background or training may be more likely to take a subtractive stance and might even require the use of English-only practices for teaching and learning.

Teachers are the driving force behind the way they implement language policies (Vanbuel & Van den Branden, 2020; Menken & García, 2010). teachers' classroom application of such policies directly impacts multilingual students. Henderson (2017) states, "teachers are at the metaphorical heart of language policy implementation and how teachers interpret, understand, and implement language policy connects intimately with the local construction of classroom-level language policy" (p. 1). Some teachers are not even aware that a language policy exists in their schools, which limits the benefits it could provide.

Subtractive Multilingualism

The erosion of a home language or culture characterizes subtractive multilingualism and occurs when languages compete (Plüddemann, 1997). Teachers adhere to subtractive language policies, often unintentionally, when they confuse English conversational skills with academic proficiency. Students do well in English immersion models, where instruction is solely in English, from kindergarten through third grade while they can keep up with peers. However, the performance in these models declines through high school when content demands are beyond their language proficiency (Kozleski et al., 2011).

A study by García et al. (2017) described how Latino students are "subjected to a *subtractive* education that leads to the loss of home languages and cultural practices because bilingual students are pushed to learn English as quickly as possible so that they can achieve academically at school" (p. 59). Another example includes policies that block students in Canada from certain programs "until they have mastered English" (Kubota & Bale, 2020, p. 780). When teachers restrict home language use in the classroom, even if the goal is to increase proficiency in another language, learning progresses slowly. Teachers who neglect to foster students' multilingual abilities impact their future by putting them at risk of alienation, academic failure, and decreased job opportunities (Allard et al., 2019).

Additive Multilingualism

Contrasting sharply with *subtractive* multilingualism is its *additive* counterpart. This approach encourages ELs to develop multilingual competencies simultaneously and helps them to accumulate language skills with "no fear of ethnic/linguistic erosion" (Plüddemann, 1997, p. 18). Although many people used to think multilingualism would confuse language learners, now the consensus is that "the more languages you know, the easier it is to learn a new one" (Fuster, 2022, p. 3). Teachers can move beyond the view of students as merely ELs by allowing the use of home languages for learning in the classroom. This additive approach draws on prior knowledge and strengths and opens access to content and grade-level materials.

There are many ways to incorporate additive approaches even when the teacher does not speak the same language as the students. These strategies include grouping students by language for some activities and mixed-language groups for others; augmenting English texts with accurate translations in different languages; and strategically alternating between languages at various stages of a lesson through preview-view-review sequencing (Allard et al., 2019).

Additionally, students can fill in any language gaps with their multilingual skills which will help develop language proficiency. Allard et al. (2019) explain other ways to build on students' funds of knowledge, such as labeling classroom items in multiple languages, building assessments that include home language components, designing assignments in which students prepare in same-language groups then creating a final product in English, and allowing students to translate for classmates in what they define as a "translating from the students up" approach (pp. 84-85).

Translanguaging in the Classroom

Henderson (2017) defines translanguaging as the "language practices and meaning-making processes of bilinguals" which frames "language performance in a verb form, rather than speaking a 'language' in the noun form" (p. 22). Fuster (2022) states that the term *translanguaging* has become popular in the shift toward language policies in which educational authorities view multilingual students' home languages as resources. García et al. (2017) have identified four main purposes for including translanguaging in the classroom:

1. Supporting students as they engage with and comprehend complex content and texts
2. Providing opportunities for students to develop linguistic practices for academic contexts
3. Making space for students' bilingualism and ways of knowing
4. Supporting students' bilingual identities and socioemotional development (p. 7)

Language learners use translanguaging skills naturally. Research indicates a strong correlation between literacy development in both languages when multilingual students draw on all linguistic resources at their disposal (Cummins, 2000). Policy makers can be confident that developing academic skills in both languages will not result in linguistic confusion. Additionally,

spending instructional time in a minority language will not reduce academic performance in the majority language used for learning in and out of the classroom (Cummins, 2000).

The concept of translanguaging raises important pedagogical questions depending on how one acknowledges multilingual students' language skills and life experiences (Paulsrud et al., 2017). Rather than viewing multilingual students as two monolinguals in one with an equal grasp of two (or more) languages, there are many opportunities to help students develop proficiency in multiple languages. This, of course, depends on how teachers address the issue in the classroom.

Implementation of Language Policies in the Classroom

Henderson (2017) suggests a systemic change that prioritizes multilingualism over monolingualism. We start to see this in the Seal of Biliteracy programs in forty-nine states—a movement started by the State of California in 2008. South Dakota was the last state to embrace the initiative, but it is now in the initial stages of adopting the seal (Seal of Biliteracy, 2022). Teacher interpretation of any formal language policy, despite its intended purpose, determines how language ideologies are "reproduced, maintained, or disrupted" (Chang-Bacon, 2022, p. 506). Cassels Johnson et al. (2018) indicated that it is the interaction between students and teachers that create language policies. While an increasing number of teachers are adopting additive approaches to language learning in their classrooms (Davila, 2020), many still question how to implement such strategies, particularly if they are monolingual themselves (Galante, 2020). One study in the state of Washington found that teachers with little or no training in sheltered instruction for language learners believed that "effective EL teaching was 'just good teaching' which often got reduced to the inclusion of more visual input" (Cassels Johnson et al., 2018, p. 505). That belief demonstrates how language policies can become diluted in the

classroom. In this case, teachers submerge students in incomprehensible input in direct violation of the *Lau v. Nichols* court case (Cassels Johnson et al. 2018) which requires educational experiences for ELs in languages they understand.

Multilingual teachers may find additive approaches to language learning easier to implement because they fully understand the significance (Zano, 2022). They would encourage students to use translanguaging actively in the classroom. Likewise, Back (2020) stated the shift to translanguaging shows that teachers are willing "to change the course of the lesson and assessment, as well as the language planned for it, to release and support students' voices" (p. 903). Brevik and Rindal (2020) said the question is not whether to allow the use of home languages in the classroom, but how to balance target language use with other languages. Menken and García (2010) maintain that any "[language] policy is as dynamic as the many individuals involved in its creation and implementation" (p. 1) and that one must expect variations. They offer *Ten Guiding Principles* for teachers to see themselves as policy makers as well as implementers.

1. Understand your own sociolinguistic profile and language practices.
2. Know the sociolinguistic profile and practices of the students in your classroom, school community, students' families, and the community surrounding the school.
3. Know the societal language management policy.
4. Know the school's language education policy.
5. Understand your beliefs, attitudes, ideologies, and motivations.
6. Understand the beliefs, attitudes, ideologies, and motivations of others.
7. Know the staffing, organization, and leadership structure of your school.

8. Understand how the curriculum and pedagogy are interrelated with language education policies, and the ways that you act as a policy maker in your school or classroom.
9. Understand how the ways of assessing students are interrelated with language education policies.
10. Remain critical and aware of language education policies. (p. 262)

All teachers determine the learning tools they provide or withhold from students. Even when formal policies exist in district handbooks or federal law, teacher perception influences implementation at the classroom level.

A review of the literature on classroom language policies, subtractive and additive multilingualism, and translanguaging, demonstrates that the inclusion of students' home languages in the classroom has many benefits. Ricento and Hornberger (1996) remind teachers that policies change as they move through various levels from administration to the classroom. These changes might be explicit changes in the wording of language policies or more subtle modifications during day-to-day interactions with students. The researchers go on to say that the most fundamental concerns teachers have are *What will I teach? How will I teach it?* and *Why do I teach?* They are quick to point out that those questions are language policy issues (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996, p. 421). The researchers further declare that teachers ratify existing policies through silence: "One way or another, all ELT professionals play a role in reaffirming or opposing language policies that affect not only our students' future lives but the lives of our communities and nations as well" (p. 422). Ossa Parra and Proctor (2021) advise teachers to recognize the valuable linguistic insights that ELs have and to encourage the use of those assets for content and language learning. Teachers have a vital role in meeting the needs of all students.

Regardless of teacher training and linguistic background, the classroom is where any language policy is eventually implemented, modified, or ignored.

The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers implement language policies in public elementary schools and to determine how such policies encourage or restrict home language use for content learning through additive or subtractive approaches to multilingualism. The guiding question was, “How do classroom language policies encourage or restrict multilingual students’ use of their home languages for learning?”

METHODS

The design of this study is a cross-sectional survey approach defined by Mills and Gay (2019) as "one in which data are collected from selected individuals at a single point in time. Cross-sectional designs are effective for providing a snapshot of the current behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs in a population” (p. 202). After district and principal approval, I sent an online survey with 17 questions to teachers with one or more ELs on their rosters in two suburban school districts in Southwest Missouri. Participants gave their consent before starting the survey. The questions included multiple choice, short response, and open-ended questions on topics such as teaching experiences, student populations, home languages, language background, policies, teaching practices, and classroom materials. This study relied on convenience sampling.

RESULTS

Of 110 surveys sent out, 21 (*19%*) participants responded, all of whom are in-service teachers who teach grades K-5 at public elementary schools in Southwest Missouri. No participants are currently enrolled in a program to add an ELL endorsement to their teaching certificates, and only one expressed interest in doing so. One participant is currently serving as an EL Specialist for a school district. Table 1 organizes the demographic information.

Table 1
Demographic data

	N	*%*
teachers who do not have ELL endorsement	18	86
Monolingual	12	57
speaks two or more languages	9	43
teachers who have ELL endorsement	3	14
expressed interest in adding ELL endorsement	1	5

The survey also identified the learning contexts in which teachers learned another language. Six of seven responses to this question (*86*%) learned through coursework; and five (*71*%) learned through travel or working in a multilingual environment. No one identified as being a heritage learner.

The home languages spoken by students vary from the language study and experiences of teachers. Survey respondents indicated that students spoke sixteen home languages including one language that school officials had not identified at the time of the survey. Teachers cannot be familiar with all the home languages that their students speak. No teachers admitted to giving students "pronounceable" names. A survey of students might challenge that claim. Most teachers in this study do not have an ELL endorsement and few have had training in meeting the unique needs of ELs. Responses show that teachers want to support their students, but often lack the training and resources.

Fifty-seven percent of teachers who responded to the survey do not speak, read, write, or understand a language other than English. Of the 43% who are proficient in another language, the majority have only a novice or intermediate understanding of Spanish, French, or American Sign Language, which shows a disparity between the number and variety of students' home

languages compared to the language competencies of their teachers. The languages spoken among students in the teacher's classrooms include Arabic, Burmese, English, Filipino, Khmer, Korean, Mandarin, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog, Turkish, Ukrainian, Vietnamese, as well as one language marked as *unknown* at the time the survey was submitted.

Survey responses indicated that 90.5% of teachers do not know if their school or district has an official language policy. Only one teacher answered that their district had an explicit language policy. The majority of teachers (80.9%) admitted to having some, very little, or no training to meet the needs of ELs. Only one teacher, who happened to be an EL Specialist, expressed confidence in meeting those needs. When asked if students have easy access to multilingual resources, top responses included: 58% multilingual books and technology; 16% multilingual tutors; 21% monolingual resources in languages other than English; whereas 26% answered that students do not have easy access to multilingual resources. Seventy-six percent of teachers said their students communicate with classmates in their home languages during the school day, 14% said no, and 10% were unsure.

Teachers identified teaching practices they incorporated by checking all statements that were applicable in their classrooms. Table 2 shows the number of responses for each descriptor and the corresponding percentage. All teachers responded that they provided increased wait time after asking a question. No one prohibits students from using their home languages all the time, although occasional restrictions apply during specific learning activities where English is required.

Table 2

Teaching Practices

	n	*%*
increased wait time	21	100
students are NEVER restricted from using their home languages for learning	14	66.7
families are included in education/promotion of home language use	10	47.6
students brainstorm, outline, or review information in their home languages	9	42.9
use of multilingual texts or texts in other languages	7	33.3
students are SOMETIMES restricted from using their home languages for learning	4	19
posters or materials posted in home languages	3	14.3
students are ALWAYS restricted from using home languages for learning	0	0

Teachers chose from the list of statements shown in Table 3 to describe their classroom environments. Again, they selected only statements applicable to their classrooms. A high number of teachers (76%) indicated that students are valued for their ability to contribute knowledge in their home languages and that they are free to express their multilingual identities. One teacher admitted that students' content knowledge and proficiency in their home languages are ignored which indicates a subtractive approach in that environment.

Table 3

Classroom Description Statements

	n	*%*
Students are valued for their ability to contribute knowledge that they acquire in their languages.	16	76.2
Students can freely express their multilingual identities in their interactions and their work.	16	76.2
Students can logically choose the language for specific tasks and situations.	11	52.4
Teachers, students, and parents are engaged in identifying and contributing learning resources available in their languages and in multilingual form.	10	47.6
The maintenance of heritage languages is an educational goal.	9	42.9
Being proficient in multiple languages is preferable to being monolingual.	9	42.9
The usefulness of using multiple languages is not questioned and does not need justifying.	9	42.9
The status of different languages is equal. They are not in competition.	8	38.1
A primary goal of education is to be multilingual and multiliterate.	6	28.6
The status of English is above the status of home languages.	5	23.8
Curricular choices are strategic to allow students to use their languages for learning.	5	23.8
A primary goal of education is to develop high proficiency in a prestigious variety of English.	4	19
English-only curricular choices are self-evident.	3	14.3
Students' knowledge in their languages and their proficiencies in their languages are ignored.	1	4.8

Note: The following statements had counts of zero.

- *Being a native speaker of English suggests superior status.*
- *The designation of being an English l earner implies deficiency.*
- *To speak English only in the classroom is the norm or even a stated rule for classroom behavior.*
- *Students are renamed to have "pronounceable" names.*
- *Everything that is in English is assumed better, more useful, more applicable, more desirable, of higher quality, or self-evident.*
- *Foreign/heritage languages belong in the foreign language classroom.*

The last option was open response. When participants were invited to share additional comments, all remarks were about teachers not having adequate resources to teach ELs.

Over 90% of teachers in this study did not know whether their school had an official language policy which demonstrates inherent limitations. Larger percentages of teachers recognized the importance of providing sufficient wait time after asking a question (100%); including families in education (47.6%); and never restricting students from using their home languages for learning (66.7%). The wording of some descriptive statements may have influenced responses, particularly in statements such as: "*superior status*;" "*implies deficiency*;" "*pronounceable*;" "*Everything that is in English is assumed better*." and "*Foreign/heritage languages belong in the foreign language classroom*." Even though all responses were anonymous, the fact that no teachers selected those descriptive statements provides insight into how they perceive their classroom environments.

DISCUSSION, FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSIONS

Discussion

More teachers are open to the idea of promoting home languages for learning (Davila, 2020); however, many are unsure of how to accomplish that goal and need quality resources in the languages spoken by students in the school. If teachers adopt additive approaches to language policies, students will have more resources to build proficiency in two or more languages simultaneously (Allard et al., 2019; Hornberger & Cassels Johnson, 2007).

Research shows that classroom teachers determine how to implement language policies (Bacon 2020; Menken & García, 2010; Shin, 2013; Vanbuel & Van den Branden, 2020). Responses to this survey support current classroom trends. Teachers push students to learn English quickly to increase academic achievement, but language proficiency and content knowledge develop slowly when students' strongest languages are excluded from the classroom. Students would benefit from additive approaches to multilingualism including drawing on

students' funds of knowledge, and incorporating strategies such as working on an assignment in same-language groups followed by the creation of a final product in English (Allard et al., 2019). These are ideas that some survey participants have not yet considered, but their responses indicate they would be willing to incorporate additive strategies with training.

Survey results show that teachers meet the needs of multilingual students with the resources and training they have. When teachers fully comprehend the power of translanguaging in the classroom, students will start to use their home languages as resources for learning. The interaction between students and teachers is where language policy occurs (Cassels Johnson et al., 2018). Teachers should balance English with home language use in the classroom. While 43% of participants agree that maintaining heritage languages is a goal, only 24% make curricular choices to allow students to use their languages for learning. The literature highlights the benefits of including home languages in academic settings, but the results of my survey confirm that teachers in Southwest Missouri need access to more resources and training to meet the unique needs of our growing culturally and linguistically diverse student population.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies may find the inclusion of interviews to gauge teacher comprehension of language policies at the school or district level. Likewise, verbal communication may provide further revelation about policy implementation in the classroom and would be more conducive to sharing additive strategies with interested teachers.

Conclusions

ELs have the right to have equal educational experiences to their peers in languages they understand and should be allowed to use their home languages for learning in the classroom. Teachers seem willing to permit home language use for learning, but do not always have easy

access to useful multilingual resources. As initiatives, such as the Seal of Biliteracy, gain more support, one can expect higher demand for multilingual resources. Where teachers rely on subtractive practices, lack of training or resources may be to blame. More teachers lean toward additive approaches to multilingualism where students can develop proficiency in two or more languages at once. Irrespective of formal language policies, teachers hold the power to put up barricades or build bridges that help multilingual students use their home languages for learning.

THE AUTHOR

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APPENDIX

Survey for Elementary Teachers of English Learners

This survey is intended for elementary teachers who have at least one English learner in their classes.

This survey may take up to 15 minutes to complete.

1. What grades do you teach? Choose all that apply.
   - ❑ K
   - ❑ 1st
   - ❑ 2nd
   - ❑ 3rd
   - ❑ 4th
   - ❑ 5th
2. How many years of teaching experience do you have?
3. Do you have an ELL endorsement on your teaching license?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No
   - ❑ Soon, I am working on it now.
   - ❑ Maybe someday.
4. How many students do you have?
5. How many students speak/read/write or understand a language other than English?
6. Which languages do your students speak?
7. Do you speak/read/write or understand any languages other than English? If so, which one(s)?

8. How did you learn additional languages? Select all that apply.
    - ❑ family / heritage
    - ❑ course work
    - ❑ travel
    - ❑ other: [free response]
9. How much training have you received in meeting the needs of English learners?
    - ❑ none
    - ❑ very little
    - ❑ some
    - ❑ a lot
    - ❑ I am an expert
    - ❑ other: [free response]
10. Does your school or district have a stated language policy?
    - ❑ Yes
    - ❑ No
    - ❑ I do not know.
11. If you answered yes to question 9 above, what is the policy?
12. Do your students have easy access to any of the following? Check all that apply.
    - ❑ multilingual resources (books, technology)
    - ❑ multilingual tutors
    - ❑ monolingual resources in languages other than English
    - ❑ other: [free response]
13. If so, how would you rate the quality of those resources?

14. Do your students (or other students in your school) communicate with classmates in a language other than English during the school day?

15. Which of the following teaching practices do you use regularly? Check all that apply.

- ❑ increased wait time to allow English learners time to answer
- ❑ posters or other materials include students' home languages
- ❑ use of multilingual texts or texts in other languages
- ❑ students brainstorm, outline, or review information in their home languages
- ❑ include families in the child's education and promote home language use
- ❑ students are **always** restricted from speaking or using their home languages for learning
- ❑ students are **sometimes** restricted from speaking or using their home languages for learning
- ❑ students are **never** restricted from speaking or using their home languages for learning

16. Which of the following statements describe your classroom? Select all that apply.

- ❑ The status of English is above the status of home languages.
- ❑ The status of different languages is equal. They are not in competition.
- ❑ A primary goal of education is to develop high proficiency in a prestigious variety of English.
- ❑ The maintenance of heritage languages is an educational goal.
- ❑ Being a native speaker of English suggests superior status.
- ❑ Being proficient in multiple languages is preferable to being monolingual.
- ❑ The designation of being an English learner implies deficiency.
- ❑ The primary goal of education is to be multilingual and multiliterate.
- ❑ English-only curricular choices are self-evident.

- ❑ The usefulness of using multiple languages is not questioned and does not need justifying.
- ❑ Students' knowledge of their home languages and their proficiencies in them are ignored.
- ❑ Curricular choices are strategic to allow students to use their languages for learning.
- ❑ To speak English only in the classroom is the norm or even a stated rule for classroom behavior.
- ❑ Students are valued for their ability to contribute knowledge that they acquire in their languages.
- ❑ Students are renamed to have "pronounceable" names.
- ❑ Students can freely express their multilingual identities in their interactions and their work.
- ❑ Everything that is in English is assumed better, more useful, more applicable, more desirable, of higher quality, or self-evident.
- ❑ Students can logically choose the language for specific tasks and situations.
- ❑ Foreign/heritage languages belong in the foreign language classroom.
- ❑ Teachers, students, and parents are engaged in identifying and contributing learning resources available in their languages and in multilingual form.

17. If there is anything else you would like to share that was not covered in the above questionnaire, please use the text box below.

Thank you for your time consideration of this survey. Individual participants in this survey will never be identified.

By clicking AGREE you are indicating that you are at least 18 years old, have read and understood this consent form, and agree to participate in this research study. Please print a copy of this page for your records.