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Home Languages outside of the Home: Translingual Practices for Content Learning in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT: This article identifies classroom approaches that encourage home language use for content learning. Multilingual students are subject to various language practices and policies in American classrooms. Some teaching practices foster additive multilingualism (English plus) however others are subtractive and lean toward an English-only approach. This quantitative study examined teaching practices of K-5 classroom teachers in Southwestern Missouri that affect multilingual students' use of their home language in the classroom. I surveyed elementary classroom teachers who instruct emergent bilinguals about classroom practices that contribute to additive multilingualism which affects emergent bilinguals' proficiency in English. 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. While some teachers think elementary students should learn [in] one language at a time, I argue that classroom teachers can rely on translingual practices to help emergent bilinguals develop language proficiency in English and their home languages simultaneously.

Keywords: Simultaneous Bilingualism, Translanguaging, Additive Multilingualism, Subtractive Multilingualism, Emergent Bilinguals

1. Introduction

Multilingual students bring their knowledge of two or more languages with them wherever they go. Some teachers know how to harness this linguistic power, but others neglect to use it to its full advantage. Alejandro, a 5th grade student, uses Spanish at home and English at school. Few of his classmates interact with him in his home language. He spends the school day interpreting English in oral and written classroom directions, video clips, computer navigation, and at the after-school program. At the end of the day, Alejandro spends time with his family using Spanish. Some school personnel see Alejandro as academically "behind" his classmates or "not learning English fast enough." His teachers do not allow him to learn or demonstrate his learning in his strongest language, nor are they providing sufficient language support to help him develop proficiency in Spanish and English at the same time. The number of emergent bilinguals (EBs) as defined by WIDA (2023) continues to rise across the U.S. (National Center, 2023). I asked teachers in Southwest Missouri how they meet the needs of this group and how they use the linguistic assets of EBs for learning.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 mandates that schools provide quality language assistance programs for EBs 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 EBs 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 (McNelly, 2015; 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 EBs understand. When language is valued as a resource, learning becomes additive in nature and allows two or more languages to develop simultaneously. Proficiency development in one language supports the other language.

Research shows that teachers determine how to implement language policies in their classrooms (Bacon 2020; Menken & García, 2010; Shin, 2013; Vanbuel & Van den Branden, 2020). If teachers adopt additive approaches to multilingualism, students will have more resources to build proficiency in two or more languages simultaneously (Allard et al., 2019; Hornberger & Cassels Johnson, 2007). Classroom 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.

Most teachers in the U.S. are monolingual and work in schools that reflect monolingual ideologies where students learn in English-dominant settings (Bacon, 2020; Shin, 2013). Discussions with teachers who have had prior language learning experience or ESL training indicate they are more likely to implement strategies based on additive approaches. Classroom observations have shown that teachers with no such background or training are more likely to require subtractive practices such as the use of English-only for teaching and learning. Some teachers fear that learning two languages simultaneously will cause confusion and slow learning progress. In this article, I emphasize the value of simultaneous bilingualism and explain how teachers can support EBs by incorporating additive teaching practices, such as translingualism, where students use their strongest languages for learning.

This quantitative study surveyed elementary classroom teaching practices that encourage or restrict multilingual students' use of their home languages for learning. The primary purpose of this study was to understand current classroom practices that contribute to EBs' language proficiency in Southwest Missouri. The next sections will go into greater detail on three approaches to multilingualism: 1) subtractive multilingualism, 2) additive multilingualism, and 3) translanguaging. These approaches will demonstrate how each one affects EBs language development followed by implications of home language use in the classroom.

2. Subtractive Multilingualism

The elimination of a home language or culture characterizes subtractive multilingualism and occurs when languages compete (Plüddemann, 1997). Students do well in English immersion models from kindergarten through third grade, where instruction is solely in English, 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). There is a difference between the skills needed for social language used for basic communication and academic language which is necessary for success in school. These differences were first described in Cummins' (1979) work on basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). If classroom teachers confuse English conversational skills with academic proficiency, they can unintentionally push EBs beyond their academic level widening the achievement gap or view home language support as unnecessary.

Learning progresses slowly when teachers restrict home language use in the classroom. 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). 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). However, teachers can support EBs by allowing multilingual resources, using visual aids to support

instruction, becoming familiar with each student's linguistic background, and by allowing EBs to use their home languages to clarify concepts. These are all ways to support additive multilingualism as described in the next section.

3. Additive Multilingualism

Contrasting with subtractive multilingualism, where home languages are replaced by a different language, is its additive counterpart. This approach encourages EBs to develop multilingual competencies simultaneously and helps them to accumulate language skills with "no fear of ethnic/linguistic erosion" (Plüddemann, 1997, p. 18). Some teachers think multilingualism will confuse EBs, but the consensus is "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 English learners by allowing the use of home languages for learning in the classroom. This additive approach draws on prior knowledge and opens access to grade-level content. Teachers help EBs develop English proficiency by encouraging them to research and study in their home languages with carefully selected resources that mirror lesson content in English.

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). Direct translations are not always necessary, but providing home language resources that cover the same content as the lesson materials is beneficial. 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 upon students' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), or cultural knowledge gained through family interactions, 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 create 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). Strategies such as these increase engagement and foster a richer learning environment that cannot be achieved when EBs are denied opportunities to think in and use their home languages for learning. Teachers can take additive approaches one step further when they encourage translanguaging strategies as described in the next section.

4. Translanguaging in the Classroom

The term translanguaging has become popular in the shift toward the view of multilingual students' home languages as resources (Fuster, 2022). Translanguaging supports additive bilingualism because it actively draws on all languages a person knows. A useful way to describe translingual strategies to teachers is to think of EBs as they shuttle among the different languages they know to help them understand (García et al., 2017). A classroom where teachers include translingual practices is a learning environment conducive to critical thinking in various languages all at once. While that might sound confusing to a monolingual, it is a reality for multilinguals every day as they subconsciously bounce from language to language to clarify and increase their comprehension. EBs use translanguaging skills naturally. 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)

Research indicates a strong correlation between literacy development in both languages when multilingual students draw on all linguistic resources at their disposal (Cummins, 2000). Teachers 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). Instead, instructional time spent learning in the home language supports EBs' proficiency in English in addition to the home language in the form of linguistic connections across content areas. 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 language use in the classroom.

5. Implications of Home Language use in Classrooms

A review of the literature on subtractive multilingualism, additive multilingualism, and translanguaging validates the beneficial inclusion of students' home languages in the classroom. EBs in elementary schools become multilingual students over time. 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 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). To earn this achievement, students must demonstrate language proficiency in English and another language through rigorous assessments in both languages. Multilingual students can earn separate seals in different languages. Teacher awareness determines how language ideologies are "reproduced, maintained, or disrupted" (Chang-Bacon, 2022, p. 506). When more elementary teachers support translingual practices in their classrooms, more students who are eligible for the Seal of Biliteracy will be identified and celebrated instead of being overlooked.

Even though 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 classroom 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 well-intentioned language practices can become diluted in the classroom.

In contrast to monolingual teachers, multilingual teachers may find additive approaches to language learning easier to implement because they fully understand the significance (Zano, 2022). They would guide students to use translanguaging 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). Both monolingual and multilingual teachers determine the learning tools they provide (or withhold) from students. Teachers can rely on translingual pedagogies as a best practice that boosts students' comprehension and communication skills.

The most fundamental concerns teachers have are "what will I teach? how will I teach it? and why do I teach?" (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996, p. 421). Teachers who are willing to incorporate additive strategies or allow students to draw on translingual practices will notice increased classroom engagement among EBs. Ossa Parra and Proctor (2021) advise teachers to recognize the valuable linguistic insights that EBs have and to encourage the use of their linguistic assets for content learning and language development. 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 (Brevik & Rindal, 2020). Teachers have a vital role in meeting the needs of all students therefore they should not avoid translingual practices in the classroom whether they are mono- or multilingual.

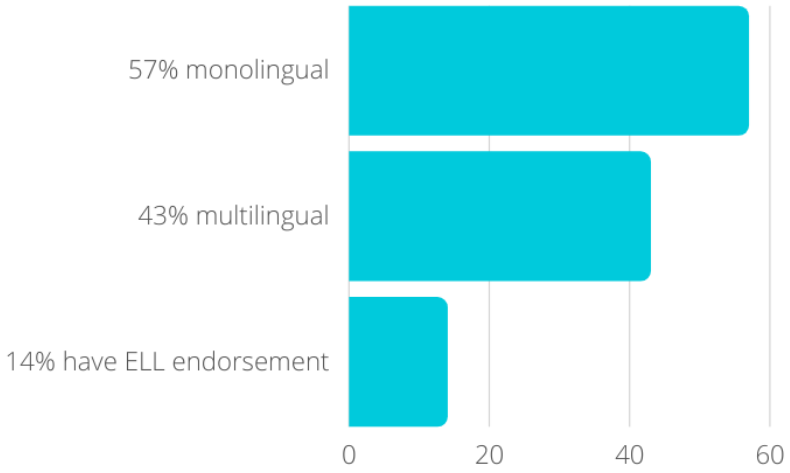
6. Methods

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 EBs on their rosters in two suburban school districts in Southwest Missouri. This survey was reviewed by the Missouri State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was determined to be exempt from further review. Respondents 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.

7. Results

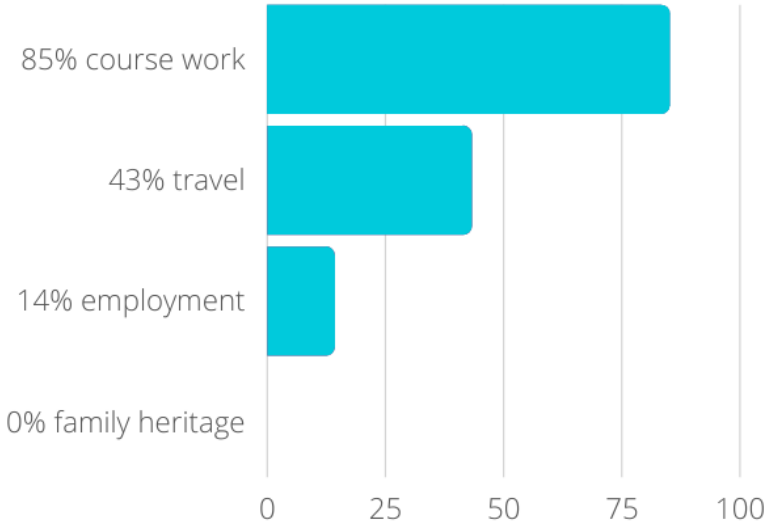
At the close of the survey, I analyzed and organized the data into tables and charts. Of 110 surveys sent out, 21 (19%) respondents responded, all of whom are in-service teachers who teach grades K-5 at public elementary schools in Southwest Missouri. Only three respondents have an ELL endorsement. No respondents are currently enrolled in a program to add an ELL endorsement to their teaching certificates and only one expressed interest in doing so. One respondent is currently serving as an EL Specialist for a school district. Figure 1 organizes the demographic information.

Figure 1. Demographic data



The survey also identified the learning contexts in which teachers learned another language. The question asked "If you speak more than one language, how did you learn additional languages? Select all that apply." Only 33% of respondents answered this question. Responses are represented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Contexts in which respondents learned another language.



The home languages spoken by students vary from the language study and experiences of teachers. Survey respondents indicated that their students spoke sixteen home languages including one language that school officials had not identified at the time of the survey. No teachers replaced students' given names with American names, however many student names were Americanized in pronunciation rendering them unrecognizable to their families in some cases. Three teachers in this study have an ELL endorsement and only one teacher expressed interest in adding it. 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 have learned 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 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. Most teachers (80.9%) had insufficient or no training to meet the needs of EBs. 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 incorporate by checking all statements that were applicable in their classrooms. Table 1 shows the percentage of responses for each descriptor. All teachers responded that they provide increased wait time after asking a question. No one prohibits students from using home languages, although occasional restrictions apply during specific learning activities where English is required.

Table 1. Teaching Practices

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

Teachers chose from the list of statements shown in Table 2 to describe their classroom environments. Again, they selected only statements applicable to their classrooms. Seventy-six percent 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 responded that students' content knowledge and proficiency in their home languages are ignored which indicates a subtractive approach in that environment.

Table 2: Classroom Description Statements

	%
Students are valued for their ability to contribute knowledge that they acquire in their languages.	76.2
Students can freely express their multilingual identities in their interactions and their work.	76.2
Students can logically choose the language for specific tasks and situations.	52.4
Teachers, students, and parents are engaged in identifying and contributing learning resources available in their languages and in multilingual form.	47.6
The maintenance of heritage languages is an educational goal.	42.9
Being proficient in multiple languages is preferable to being monolingual.	42.9
The usefulness of using multiple languages is not questioned and does not need justifying.	42.9
The status of different languages is equal. They are not in competition.	38.1
A primary goal of education is to be multilingual and multiliterate.	28.6
The status of English is above the status of home languages.	23.8
Curricular choices are strategic to allow students to use their languages for learning.	23.8
A primary goal of education is to develop high proficiency in a prestigious variety of English.	19
English-only curricular choices are self-evident.	14.3
Students' knowledge in their languages and their proficiencies in their languages are ignored.	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 learner implies deficiency.*
- *To speak English only in the classroom is the norm or even a stated rule for classroom behavior.*
- *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 respondents were invited to share additional comments, all remarks were about teachers not having adequate resources to teach EBs.

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,” “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. Forty-three percent of respondents agree that maintaining heritage languages is a goal, however, only 24% make curricular choices to allow students to use their languages for learning.

8. Discussion, Future Research, and Conclusion

8.1 Discussion

Students’ strongest languages should be embraced in the classroom. Some strategies that survey respondents indicate they would be willing to try include drawing on students’ funds of knowledge, working on an assignment in same-language groups, and the creation of a final product in English (Allard et al., 2019). This requires training so teachers will become better prepared to include these practices in their teaching. Monolingual teachers who push students to learn English quickly to increase academic achievement cause language proficiency and content knowledge develop slowly.

Students would benefit from using their home languages as resources for learning in academic settings, but the results of my survey suggest 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. Teachers must balance English with home language use in the classroom without fear of causing confusion.

Translanguaging is a daily reality for multilingual people all over the world. Elementary students are just as capable of using their translingual abilities for content learning as they do naturally for comprehension and communication outside of the classroom. Whether or not a classroom teacher is familiar with a student’s home language is beside the point. When students are allowed to use their strongest languages, engagement and critical thinking skills will be more prevalent. Teachers can integrate additive approaches to multilingualism into lessons and independent study time by curating multilingual resources for the languages represented in their school communities. With effort, academic spaces can become rich with grade-level content available in home languages that facilitate English language proficiency development.

8.2 Recommendations for Future Research

In addition to surveys, interviews would better gauge teacher comprehension of teaching practices that promote additive multilingualism such as translingual approaches. Personal or small group interviews would prompt discussions about translingual strategies, multilingual resources, and the effectiveness of professional development in these areas. The interviewer could also share relevant resources with interested teachers or coordinate with English Language Development Coordinators to offer teacher training in translingual strategies.

8.3 Conclusion

Teachers can either put up barricades to learning or build bridges that help multilingual students develop proficiency in English and their home languages at the same time. EBs deserve to have educational experiences equal to their peers in languages they understand. They should be encouraged to use translingual practices in the classroom, drawing on their strongest languages, as they do in daily life. Teachers who rely on subtractive practices need training to maximize EBs’ learning potential. Teachers who

include home language use for content learning need access to high quality multilingual resources. Additive approaches to multilingualism, such as translanguaging, will help teachers support EBs develop language proficiency in English and their home languages simultaneously.

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 respondents 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.