



Supporting Multilingual Students in College

by Elena Lawrick, Ph.D.

Diversity on college campuses has become ubiquitous, largely due to more access to higher education for rapidly changing U.S. demographics. Apart from economic reasons, diverse students are sought out by colleges of all sorts for their multicultural appeal and global experiences. One might say that linguistically diverse students represent reality knocking on the front door of U.S. higher education. Admitting linguistically diverse students, however, creates a considerable challenge of figuring out how to support them on the journey to college graduation.

For a higher education institution, linguistically diverse students pose a broad spectrum of challenges, some including:

1. An umbrella term that would accurately denote this highly heterogeneous student population
2. Processes to identify linguistically diverse students
3. Placement tests able to provide accurate recommendations
4. Placement processes sensitive to student linguistic and cultural needs
5. Ways to raise faculty's awareness of an intricate and abstruse nature of developing academic proficiency in English
6. Academic support that is appropriate and effective

In this article, I will first discuss the benefits of using the term *multilingual* students, as opposed to ESL, international, or Generation 1.5. Then I will discuss the challenge of developing the academic support which promotes college persistence among linguistically diverse students. By doing so, I will draw on my four years of founding and directing The Learning Center for Multilingual Students at Reading Area Community College (RACC) in Reading, PA, which made a breakthrough in responding to the diversity challenge. My argument is also informed by numerous conversations with my students whose college path began in RACC's ESL Program and many of whom were able to graduate from four-year colleges within a short period of time, largely due to the support received in the Multilingual Center during their time at RACC.

What is an appropriate term to call linguistically diverse students?

Linguistically diverse students have long been referred to indiscriminately as "ESL" or dichotomously as "international" vs. "Generation 1.5". This terminology, however, is no longer accurate: Because of the multiplicity of students' language backgrounds and legal statuses, neither term can denote a richly diverse ESL student population. For example, many immigrant students studying at community colleges become lawful permanent residents shortly after their arrival in the U.S. Some of them are, in fact, U.S. citizens born in the U.S. yet educated in their home countries. The language needs of such students are close to those of international students; however, their motivation is to integrate into the local community and build their lives in the U.S. Therefore, they tend to identify themselves as American – that is, not ESL – students.

Similarly, domestic students who are often referred to as Generation 1.5 exhibit a vastly broad range of language needs and perceived identities. A growing number of Generation 1.5-ers do not self-identify as ESL speakers. Due to their near-native English oral proficiency, they tend to be indistinguishable from native English speaking students – that is, until their first writing assignment or test. A widespread assumption is that the ability to converse fluently with an advisor during a short encounter ensures that the student will be able to hold up academically to the pressures of college-level coursework. This frequently results in the student's being identified as not having ESL needs. Such assumptions perpetuate an invisible status of many Generation 1.5 bilinguals who do not graduate because they do not receive academic support appropriate to their language needs. To complicate matters further, labeling resident students as ESL may conflict with their perception of identity, as Ortmeier-Hooper (2008) thoughtfully reminds us.

Another erroneous yet common assumption is that the students identified as ESL on a placement test should stay in ESL courses until they are *completely* ready for college-level coursework. Achieving college readiness is frequently equated with attaining native-like English proficiency. One unrealistic expectation arising out of this misconception is that after completing an English-for-academic-purposes (EAP) program, students will be able to perform writing tasks as fast and accurate as their native English peers, that is, without appropriate support and extra time. Not being able to come up to unrealistic expectations, students have to carry the weight of the ESL label, along with pertinent assumptions, a long time after passing their ESL classes.

As one can see, it is not just the accuracy of the term denoting linguistically diverse students that is a problem. The concern is that inaccurate terms encourage erroneous assumptions guiding institutional policies and classroom practices, as well as cripple the forging of positive student identities. Put simply, the way we call linguistically diverse students may inhibit their academic success.

An emerging umbrella term for a vastly diverse ESL population is *multilingual*. It allows for more accurate representation¹ of diverse language backgrounds of students, many of whom communicate in three or more languages on a regular basis. A student from West Africa comes to mind. A proficient speaker of French, German, Dutch, Fula, Malinké and Susu, he was quickly learning English in academic ESL classes at RACC. Notably, that student is not an exception; most of my RACC students seamlessly switched between two or more languages in their interactions with peers, teachers, co-workers, and family.

The umbrella term *multilingual* denotes both international and domestic students, those who communicate in other languages more comfortably than in English and those who are equally comfortable communicating in English and other languages. Importantly, using this term helps develop a culture which celebrates linguistic diversity, thus boosting ESL students' confidence and motivation to succeed in college.

What academic support is appropriate and effective?

Regardless of differences, all multilingual students tend to exhibit two conflicting characteristics: In order to succeed, they require support tailored to their *changing* needs during their *entire* time in college. Although recognizing this need, students are hesitant to come to the

ESL Lab due to their desire to be like other, non-ESL, students. These conflicting needs cannot be successfully met in the traditional academic support centers, the ESL Lab and campus tutoring center.

Why is the ESL Lab not an obvious solution?

Traditionally, ESL Labs belong to academic ESL programs. They are designed to assist English learning students in developing academic English proficiency sufficient for entry college-level courses. That is, the ESL Lab traditionally functions as a supplement to classroom learning, providing practice in speech, writing, and listening and reading comprehension. For this purpose, ESL labs remain relevant; however, they are not equipped to adequately support multilingual students who face the challenges of college-level courses *after* passing ESL classes. Furthermore, the perception of ESL as pre-college and/or stigmatic often prevents students from seeking help in the ESL Lab.

Why the campus tutoring center is not a feasible solution?

In an effort to support multilingual students, many college learning and writing centers began to add an ESL tutor to their staff. While this approach has some merit and may work well for U.S.-born multilingual students who seek assistance with writing assignments, it may not be efficient for several reasons.

Firstly, it is difficult to implement effective ESL writing tutoring. Working with multilingual writers is grounded in the philosophy and techniques which are different from those adopted by writing centers. Furthermore, it requires more substantial tutor training, which many colleges cannot afford to provide. To be able to assist multilingual writers effectively, a tutor needs to learn the basics of second language writing, second language acquisition, and intercultural rhetoric – in addition to knowing the foundations of composition. Secondly, ESL-sensitive writing tutoring addresses only one facet of a complex need. Multilingual students need a continuous, supportive socialization into the English-speaking world of college studies. This includes equipping them with metalanguage (academic and college-specific vocabulary, comprehension of forms, and learning culturally expected patterns of presenting information); helping them understand college expectations and processes; and providing emotional support. Clearly, sporadic writing tutoring is not intended to handle these tasks. Finally, working with a tutor allows for little possibility to make friends with multilingual peers who tackle similar academic challenges. It does not promote connections among multilingual students who would benefit from supporting one another emotionally and academically.

Why is a “Center for Multilingual Students” a promising solution?

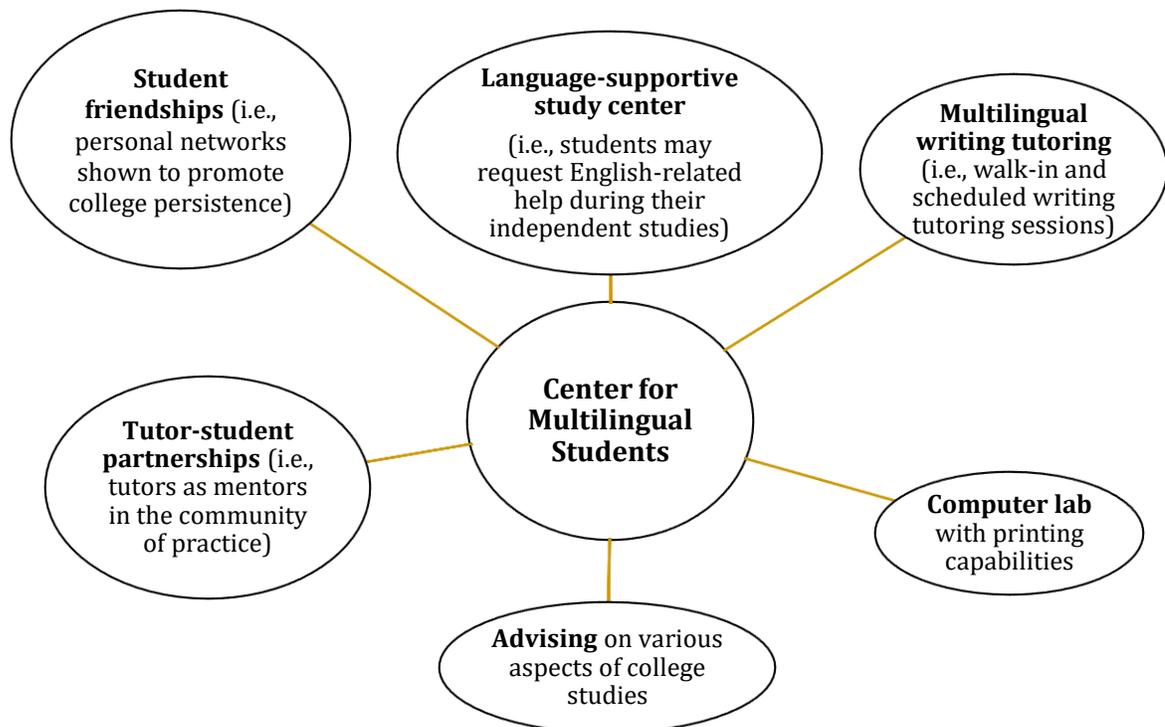
An alternative to the conventional solutions discussed above is to establish a Center for Multilingual Students. This holistic approach is based on the following underlying assumptions:

- Academic support is effective only when it is designed specifically for the needs of multilingual students.
- While language support is important, it should not override the emphasis on learning course content. Language is a means of student socialization into academic disciplines. Therefore, appropriate language usage should be taught as a resource for building content knowledge.

- Support should not end with passing ESL courses; instead, it should be available through a student’s entire time in college.
- Support comes in many forms, writing tutoring being only one form.
- Personal networks are essential for college persistence; therefore, both student friendships and tutor-student partnerships need to be fostered.
- A safe and non-judgmental environment is essential. The Center’s staff should foster a culture of personal growth, support struggling students and celebrate any achievement no matter how small it is.
- Developing a sense of ownership by students is crucial. The goal is to build the perception of “our place” as opposed to “a service for students with special needs.”

It is difficult to overestimate the role of a safe place where multilingual students can be them-imperfect-English-selves, where they are not judged by their accents (oral, written, or cultural), and where they are not treated as learners. A Center for Multilingual Students can be that safe place where students’ rich language, cultural, and educational backgrounds are recognized as an asset and students’ confidence and knowledge is growing along with their English proficiency in the supportive, family-like environment. Although the need is obvious, academic centers for multilingual students are yet to become commonplace.

The graphic below shows a set-up of a center that functions as an educational hub for students enrolled in both ESL and college-level courses, thus providing comprehensive support for multilingual students. Based on the four-year data collected at Reading Area Community College, this model produces improved retention and college graduation rates.



Recently, I had a visitor, my former ESL student who is two months away from graduation, double-majoring in Spanish and ESL. Describing his smooth sailing from being a community college transfer student to a B.A. education major in a four-year public university, he attributed his success to two centers for multilingual students. “The first day on [university] campus, I was looking for the center like the one we have at RACC,” he said. Luckily, his university had such a safe, welcoming place for multilingual students.

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Endnotes

1. An important caveat needs to be added. In this article, my argument concerns the labels for linguistically diverse students used by college administration, faculty, and staff. In this respect, I argue that the term *multilingual* is more accurate and conducive to promoting a culture of inclusive engagement. However, *ESL*, *international*, and *Generation 1.5* are technical terms widely used by TESOL professionals and scholars; they are unlikely to be replaced. Furthermore, the term *international* is relevant and appropriate for admission and international student offices, which handle the visa-related processes.

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