CEAR
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AMPLIFYING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT FOR MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

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Introduction

Whether in Dubai, New York, or Hamburg, the 21st-century classroom is multilingual by default. Yet, many educational systems operate on monolingual assumptions, often designing instruction for an "ideal" native English speaker — an increasingly rare archetype.

Background to the Problem

Multilingual learners (MLs) spend approximately 80–90% of their instructional day in content-area classrooms, typically receiving only one period of stand-alone language support. However, most content-area teachers have not received targeted training in language development or multilingual pedagogies—an understandable gap given the historic separation between language and content instruction in many systems (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2019). This lack of preparation can lead to instructional misalignment, unintentionally sidelining the needs of MLs and limiting equitable access to grade-level content and academic advancement. Students who appear fluent due to strong Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are frequently perceived as fully proficient, masking critical gaps in Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)—the advanced language required for complex texts, academic tasks, and disciplinary discourse (Cummins, 2000). As a result, instruction is sometimes simplified rather than scaffolded, reducing opportunities to engage with rigorous vocabulary and content, and ultimately perpetuating achievement gaps. This disconnect between educator expectations and the academic needs of MLs remains a persistent barrier to equity.

Literature Review

This research is grounded in Cummins' (1979, 2000) theory of BICS and CALP, which distinguishes between conversational fluency and the academic language necessary for school success—highlighting the need for intentional language scaffolding (Cummins, 1979, 2000). Marsh's (1994) CLIL framework reinforces that language and content must be taught together, not in isolation. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory further supports this by emphasizing the role of guided interaction and scaffolding in language development. Honigsfeld and Dove's (2010) co-teaching model was central to this work, illustrating that shared responsibility between content and language teachers fosters equity and improves access for MLs. These theories directly informed the instructional design. CLIL shaped the integration of language and content goals, while the Instructional Core (City et al., 2009) guided how co-teaching would enhance the interaction between teacher practice, content rigor, and student learning.

Methods

This action research responds to real-time challenges in the classroom through ongoing data-driven decision-making, collaboration, and reflection. This approach is effective for exploring instructional change, as it allows educators to test and refine a co-teaching model in an authentic setting while supporting continuous improvement and directly involving both teachers and students in the process.

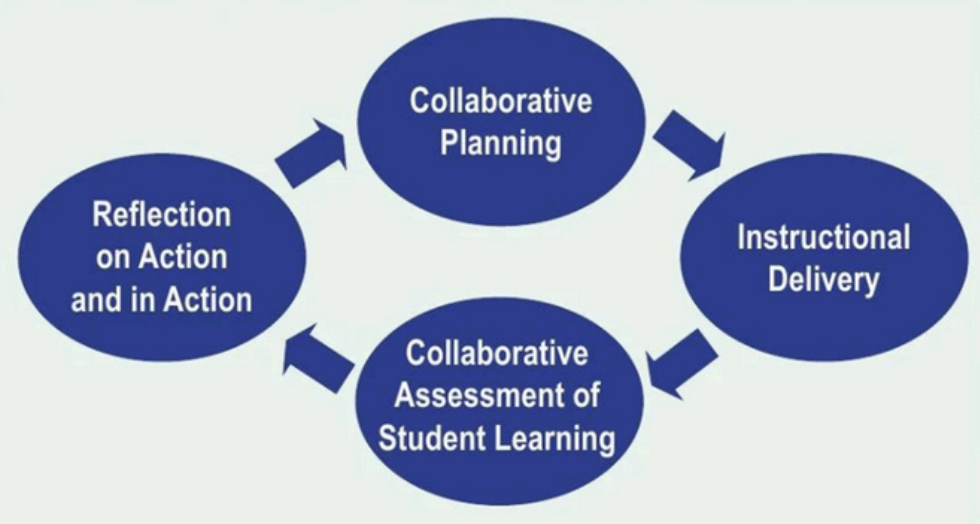
Research Questions

- How can data be used to drive instruction and differentiation for MLs?
- To what extent does explicit language and content instruction improve reading and literacy outcomes for MLs?
- How do co-planned and co-taught lessons impact MLs, SEN + MLs, and mainstream students?

Methodology

This six-month action research was conducted in a Grade 9 English classroom, co-led by an EAL teacher and an English subject expert, drawing on Honigsfeld and Dove's co-teaching models (see **Figure 1**). Lessons were co-planned to integrate Grade 9-level content with explicit language and literacy objectives, ensuring multilingual learners could access rigorous curriculum while developing academic English (Zwiers & Weiss, 2023).

Figure 1 The Collaborative Instructional Cycle



Note. Adapted from ELLs: Co-teaching and collaboration by Honigsfeld & Dove (2015).

A wide range of literary and non-literary texts were used, supported by graphic organizers, chunked readings, and scaffolded discussions to make complex material accessible.

Instructional strategies included, but were not limited to:

- Explicit Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary instruction
- Grammar taught in meaningful context
- Listening tasks with guided note-taking
- Real-world writing assignments
- Structured peer and self-assessment
- Collaborative learning protocols
- Question Formulation Technique (QFT) (Rothstein & Santana, 2011)
- Three Reads Protocol (Walqui & van Lier, 2010)

Instruction followed iterative cycles of planning, co-teaching, observation, and reflection, allowing the team to adjust supports and instruction based on ongoing student progress.

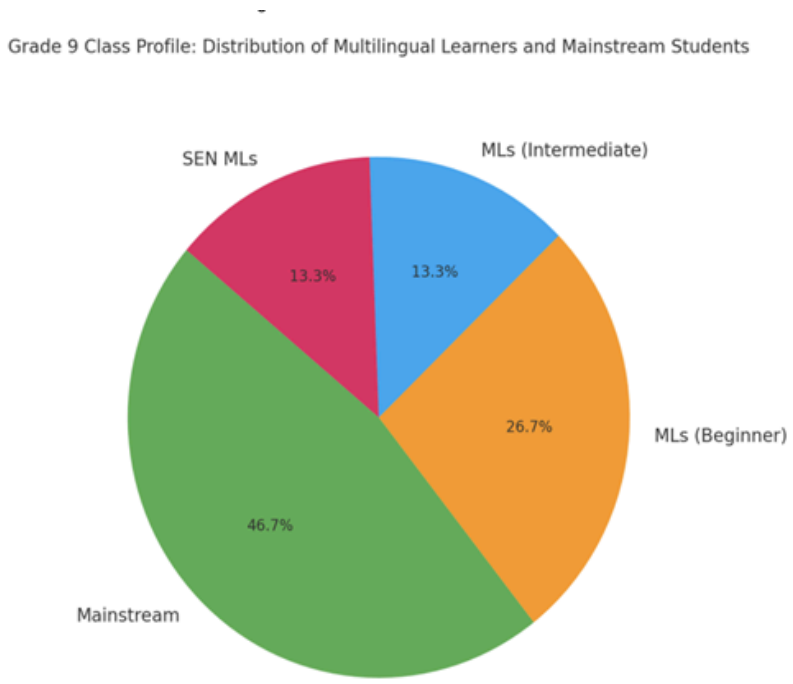
Participants

The Grade 9 English class was selected because it reflected the diverse linguistic and learning profiles commonly found in international school settings. The class included:

- Recently arrived newcomer students with limited English proficiency
- Long-term multilingual learners (MLs) who had been receiving English language support for several years
- Students dually identified as ELLs and with Special Educational Needs (SEN)
- Mainstream students (grade-level peers without additional language or learning support needs)

This range provided a rich context to explore how integrated language and content instruction can support varied learners within a mainstream academic setting (see **Figure 2**).

Figure 2
Class Breakdown



Total: 15 students

- 7 Mainstream students
- 8 MLs:
- 4 Beginner
- 2 Intermediate
- 2 SEN & MLs

Data Collection and Analysis

A mixed-methods approach was used to evaluate the impact of the co-teaching model. Quantitative data included MAP reading scores (Fall to Winter) and Lexile growth data (Winter to Winter), analyzed across three instructional models: co-teaching, traditional, and honors. These were disaggregated by student groups—Multilingual Learners (MLs), Special Educational Needs (SEN) & MLs, and mainstream students—to identify literacy growth patterns.

Qualitative data included Swivl lesson recordings (reviewed for instructional moves and student discourse), student work samples (assessed for academic language use), and observation notes documenting student engagement and scaffold usage. Data were examined systematically across cycles to connect instructional practices with outcomes and to assess how various instructional environments supported or constrained student progress.

Discussion and Reflections

Integrating language and content through co-teaching gave MLs access to grade-level instruction with the scaffolding needed to succeed. At the same time, it built teacher capacity—strengthening the craft of differentiation, deepening instructional practice, and encouraging collective responsibility. This dual impact extended beyond MLs, improving outcomes across the classroom. The data also confirmed that academic learning needs differ fundamentally from language development needs, each requiring dedicated, intentional support.

Conclusion

These insights reaffirm that language is central to curriculum planning—literacy and learning are inseparable from it. Embedding language in content-area instruction not only advances academic achievement for multilingual learners but also cultivates inclusive, high-impact teaching practices. Real transformation requires intentional collaboration, ongoing professional development, and a schoolwide shift in mindset—one that positions multilingualism as an asset and a driver of excellence. Crucially, this approach is scalable across subjects, grade levels, and entire school systems.

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