



## Training University Tutors to Work with Bilingual Students

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## Author Biography

Dr. Sara Incera is an Associate Professor in the Psychology Department at Eastern Kentucky University. She teaches cognitive psychology and research methods in person and online. Sara is the director of the Multilingual Laboratory, and her research interests include the psychology of bilingualism and foreign accents.

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Dr. Ashley Sweat is the Director of the Student Success Center at Eastern Kentucky University. She previously served as an academic advisor for undeclared students and director of the Upperclass Academy for Diverse Students. Dr. Sweat credits Upward Bound for her desire to help students become personally and academically successful.

Dr. Judy Jenkins is the Director of the Center for STEM Excellence and an Associate Professor in the Chemistry Department at EKU. In these roles she facilitates experiences for students to use math and science to solve societally relevant challenges, so these students come to see themselves as world-changers.

# 2022 Pedagogicon Proceedings

## Training University Tutors to Work with Bilingual Students

**Sara Incera, Haleigh Hamilton, Angie Marroquin, Socorro Zaragoza, Trena Napier, Lara Vance, Ashley Sweat, & Judy Jenkins**

Eastern Kentucky University

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*The purpose of this project was to train university tutors to improve their support of bilingual students (ESL/ELL students). We developed an evidence-based training session that emphasizes university connectedness and cultural inclusion. This one-hour training included background information, tutoring tips, and time for discussion. The majority of tutors (44 out of 47) reported learning something helpful they could use when tutoring. While this intervention was specifically designed to target bilingual students, most evidence-based tips discussed here are applicable to all students. It is crucial to provide tutors with the skills and resources necessary to better connect with their students.*

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### Introduction

The purpose of this project was to train university tutors (materials [available at the Open Science Framework](#)) to provide better support to bilingual students—also called English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Language Learners (ELL). The number of bilingual students in higher education in the United States is growing (Bergey et al., 2018). The Institute of International Education reported that in the 2019-2020 academic year there were over 1 million international students in higher education (Institute of International Education, 2020), and English is not the first language of most international students. Of the more than 1 billion people who speak English in the world, more than two-thirds (700+ million) speak English as a second language (Ethnologue, 2022). In Kentucky, 5.6% of the population speaks a language other than English at home (US Census, 2022). The most frequent languages other than English spoken in Kentucky are Spanish, Swahili, Arabic, German, and Japanese.

In order to train university tutors to improve their support of bilingual students, we developed an evidence-based training session that focuses on university connectedness and cultural inclusion (Hamilton, 2022). University connectedness refers to the students' subjective sense of overall fit within the university. Cultural

inclusion refers to the active engagement with people from diverse backgrounds. This training emphasizes the need for the tutors to develop positive relationships with the students to empower their learning (Felten & Lambert, 2020). It also highlights that bilingualism is a strength (Rashid, 2015) that should be celebrated. We need to move away from a deficits-based approach and terms like *ESL* and *ELL* that are commonplace in higher education but have negative connotations. Throughout the training we used the term *bilingual* and encouraged tutors to do the same when working with this population of students. We argue that it is important to connect with the students, build on their strengths, and celebrate that being able to speak more than one language is a very useful skill.

## **Context**

Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) is a public university situated near the heart of the Bluegrass, at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. It is a regional comprehensive university that offers a variety of majors and minors along with certificates. There are around 14,000 students that come from different U.S states and other countries. More than half of the students are first-generation, low-income, or both. The student-faculty ratio is 15:1 and there are around 200 student organizations. EKU offers many tutoring services; the tutors in this intervention were part of the Bobby Verdugo and Yoli Rios Bilingual Peer Mentor & Tutoring Center (El Centro), the Noel Studio, the Student Success Center, and the STEM Tutoring Center.

**El Centro** offers bilingual tutoring and mentoring for students interested in multilingual and multicultural community building and scholarship. El Centro also provides a space to apply the skills learned in language and culture classes in real-world settings through volunteering or service-learning community engagement.

**The Noel Studio** for Academic Creativity is a free resource offering writing, communication, and research support for undergraduate and graduate students from any major or class. At the Noel Studio, consultants help with essays, presentations, research posters, visual aids, multimodal products, and more through peer-to-peer meetings called consultations, which are available both in-person and online.

**The Student Success Center** is designed to serve as a one-stop-shop where students can get assistance with an array of areas like coursework, financial aid, study skills, choosing a major, course registration, stress management, and much more. There are specific workshops geared toward helping students with study

skills, choosing a major, reading in college, stress and anxiety, major-specific areas, and more.

**The Center for STEM Excellence** offers free academic support for students taking classes in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics. The Center has math, statistics, biology, and chemistry tutoring in the Science Building Atrium and regular review sessions are scheduled for a variety of mathematics and statistics courses.

## **Training**

We developed an evidence-based training session (see Figure 1) to provide tutors with the skills and resources necessary to support bilingual students. The training lasted one hour and included background information, tutoring tips (Ilanetta & Fitzgerald, 2016), and time for discussion. We thought it was important to leave time in the training for the tutors to share and discuss their own experiences with bilingual students. The training was designed to encourage communication between students, tutors, and faculty and to share the resulting information widely.

**Figure 1.** Image from one of the evidence-based training sessions for the tutors.



The background information section included specific details about the population of bilingual students our tutors are most likely to encounter. In addition to helpful facts about the most common languages spoken in Kentucky, the introduction included a discussion about language identity. We discussed how the language(s) we speak influence how we view ourselves. This conversation included several questions to help the tutors think deeper about these issues:

- How is speaking English seen as a privilege in our society?
- Do you see language stereotypes in popular culture today?
- What does this imply about cultural views of languages other than English?
- What factors inhibit bilingualism in our society?

Following the discussion about language identity, we presented the results from a previous survey we conducted with bilingual students (Hamilton, 2022). According to the survey data, academic satisfaction in bilingual students is strongly predicted by university connectedness and cultural inclusion. Surprisingly, English

proficiency did not influence satisfaction (Hamilton, 2022). When students believe their university is committed to providing a good education and feel like they belong, their academic satisfaction is higher (Cardona & Bravo, 2012). Similarly, high levels of cultural inclusion also result in increased academic satisfaction (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2016; Museus & Saelua, 2017). In the following section we introduce the specific tips we covered in the training.

### *Tips for Tutors*

Based on the findings discussed above, our training session included specific tips for connection and inclusion, as well as tutoring tips designed to help bilingual students.

**Start with a non-verbal activity.** As part of this project, we created and displayed posters in each tutoring center (see Figure 2). When a bilingual student comes in for tutoring, they are encouraged to look at the map and mark the place where they (or their family) are originally from. This icebreaker activity makes students feel more included and comfortable. Having a map full of dots from all over the world helps students realize that they are not alone.

Figure 2. Poster available at the tutoring centers to use as an ice-breaker activity.

**Write hello in your native language!**  
 Bonjour  
 guten tag  
 salve  
 nín hǎo  
 olá

**Write what you look forward to at ECU?**

**Write your favorite word in your native language!**  
 Hocus Pocus

★ The Noel Studio offers help with writing, communication and research.  
 ★ The Student Success Center offers tutoring in various academic subjects, mentoring, academic coaching, and assistance in an array of other areas.

★ El Centro offers mentoring and tutoring services in Spanish, other languages, and in general education classes.  
 ★ The Center for STEM Excellence offers tutoring in math, biology, chemistry, and physics.

**Learn a few words in their language.** Tutors are encouraged to learn how to say “hello” and “thank you” in each of the most common languages other than English. If the tutors do not know how to say these words in the student’s first language, we recommend that they ask the student to teach them how to do so. Remembering two words is relatively easy and using them throughout the consultation will help create rapport and a deeper sense of connection. This small step will go a long way as it will show the student that we care about them.

**Emphasize bilingualism as a strength.** As discussed above, when communicating with a student for whom English is not their first language, we use the word *bilingual* as opposed to *ESL* or *ELL*. Following the strength-based approach, we want to emphasize that being bilingual is not a weakness but a useful skill of which to be proud. We want to help boost the students’ confidence in their learning abilities.



**Be patient.** During the training, tutors are instructed to slow down when explaining topics that are difficult for the student. It is important to give the student ample time to think about their answers. While this is helpful to all students, this is particularly important to those communicating in their second language. In addition to thinking about the content, the student might be translating the information to their native language and the answer back to English, so tutors should make sure to lengthen their wait time.

**Recognize students' backgrounds and abilities.** One size does not fit all, so it is important to observe the students carefully to determine their strengths and weaknesses. Tutors should start with positive feedback and then establish a clear agenda of what issues they may be addressing. Additionally, they should start small, in order to avoid overwhelming the student. Tutors should allow for interactions that include the student's voice while planning the tutoring session.

**Identify specific issues.** Some students may struggle with the language while others might struggle with the content of the assignment. Tutors can start a session by asking if the class content is difficult to understand, and, within that, if there are specific topics that are more difficult than others. Then, tutors should ask what specific aspects of English (vocabulary, grammar, reading, conversation) the student is best at and what (if any) they find most difficult. They should be as specific as possible when identifying the student's challenges.

**Focus on collaboration.** When tutoring students, it is important to remember that tutors are not simply giving information. They need to be a consultant/coach/collaborator as opposed to a teacher/editor/evaluator. The dynamic that is set up with the student is important for their learning, so the tutor needs to create an atmosphere where collaboration is possible. Collaborating creates a better learning environment for the student and helps them build their confidence.

**Frequently check for understanding.** After explaining a concept, tutors need to check in with the student and let them know it is okay if they do not understand yet. It is important to ask them how the student feels about each specific concept. This helps with monitoring the student's understanding and helps the tutor to know what to do next.

**Use available tools to aid in communication.** Language barriers do not mean that communication is impossible. When communicating with bilingual students it might be helpful to use translation apps and visual aids (pictures, videos, objects, etc.). These resources are likely to improve communication and understanding.

They will also show the students that the tutor is doing everything they can to support them.

At the end of the training session, there was a discussion of helpful resources to use when tutoring bilingual students. We developed a bilingual guide in different languages that the tutors can share with the students. The guide includes this message to the bilingual students:

*“We would like you all to know that ECU is here for you. There are faculty, students, tutors, and other resources to aid you. Being bilingual is a strength that you should be proud of. If you happen to struggle at some point, everyone at ECU will do their best to help you. We are here to support you in your studies and to ensure you thrive.”*

During the last few minutes of the training session, all tutors were asked to complete a brief survey about the training session. The survey included quantitative and qualitative questions. The following section describes the tutors' responses.

## **Feedback**

Responses to the feedback survey indicate that 94% of tutors (44 out of 47) learned something helpful they could use when tutoring. Overall, tutors rated the session as very useful (*Mean* = 4.36 out of 5). The feedback survey included three open-ended questions so the tutors could provide additional information regarding their impressions about the training. When exploring the tutors' responses, we grouped them by topics and counted the number of instances each topic emerged across participant responses. We created three tables (one per question) with example quotes from the tutors.

First, the tutors were asked to report on the specific things they learned that could be useful during tutoring (see Table 1). When answering this question, students emphasized the importance of knowing effective consultation approaches, connecting with the students, and learning about different cultures. The topics of being patient and valuing the students' strengths also emerged.

**Table 1.** Answers to the question: “What have you learned that you can apply to tutoring bilingual students?”

<b>Topics (Instances)</b>	<b>Example Quotes</b>
Consultation Approaches (11)	<p>“Strategies to communicate nonverbally or communicate via things students already know”</p> <p>“I learned helpful tutoring strategies to use when working with ESL or ELL students, such as using visuals, learning words from their first language, and making sure to let them know that bilingualism is a strength.”</p> <p>“I learned that I should start with a fun and cool activity and focus on building their confidence.”</p>
Connection (8)	<p>“Helpful tips for being more positive and building a connection with my students”</p> <p>“I learned that creating a strong connection with students and collaborating with them can help them feel more connected in their learning.”</p> <p>“I learned that just learning a little bit about another person’s language or culture can help students feel more connected and respected when learning.”</p>
Cultural Learning (6)	<p>“Learning values of cultures”</p> <p>“I think that the notion of being more mindful of other people’s culture was something really important that was shared”</p> <p>“I think the biggest thing I’m taking away from this presentation is becoming more aware of the culture of others when approaching tutoring and learning. That’s an element of instruction I take for granted.”</p>

Topics (Instances)	Example Quotes
Patience (5)	<p>“Being patient and understanding of the students”</p> <p>“I have learned the importance of slowing down and having patience when talking to students who do not speak English as a first language.”</p> <p>“I think the biggest thing was to just take your time and possibly ask questions in a different way. It takes so much effort to comprehend another language on top of learning concepts and doing assignments.”</p>
Valuing Students (4)	<p>“Valuing the student’s intelligence; equity vs equality”</p> <p>“The idea that these students are smarter than me! Amazing!”</p> <p>“I like the idea that I can learn things in their first language. Also, it made me realize how brave students are to be in an environment that they know will be challenging.”</p>
Miscellaneous (3)	<p>“Inclusivity statistically helps”</p> <p>“How to be more passionate about our jobs, how to support our students, how to help them learn better, and how to better understand their struggles.”</p> <p>“Because I have worked with ESL students before, I knew the basics taught today but it was very interesting to hear others point of view.”</p>

Second, the tutors were asked to report what advice they would give to professors working with bilingual students (see Table 2). The overwhelming majority of responses included the idea of having patience; tutors repeatedly mentioned how necessary having enough time is for learning. Furthermore, the tutors reported that investing in students, providing clarity, and considering cultural inclusion are other things faculty can do to better support bilingual students in their classes.

**Table 2.** Answers to the question: What advice would you give to professors about working with bilingual students?"

Topics (Instances)	Example Quotes
Patience (23)	<p>"I would tell professors to be patient and allow students plenty of time to learn because all students learn differently."</p> <p>"Be patient and understanding with your students. They are intelligent, they just sometimes need more tools to complete and understand their work."</p> <p>"Be patient and try to have multiple ways of explaining an assignment or lesson."</p>
Invest in students (5)	<p>"They need more time and consideration- you have to spend more time making sure they're really understanding what you want/need from them."</p> <p>"Strive to do better to meet the needs of your students. They want to learn, it is hard and they still do it."</p> <p>"I would tell them that ESL students are smart and remind them that it's their job to help ALL of their students"</p>
Clarity (4)	<p>"More clear assignment prompts"</p> <p>"It is helpful to give instructions that are very precise. Any degree of ambiguity can be confusing."</p> <p>"Make the material easily understandable especially since sometimes it gets confusing to understand what's going on in class."</p>
Cultural Inclusion (3)	<p>"To take into consideration the difference in cultures"</p> <p>"Try to understand that there is usually a cultural difference at play that can affect communication and interactions."</p> <p>"To be more patient and understand cultural backgrounds"</p>
Miscellaneous (5)	<p>"Reach out to the ESL students you know are struggling and try and create or direct them to resources"</p> <p>"It's not that hard to take the extra step to be kind and helpful to these students."</p> <p>"ESL students are smart people, some of the smartest I've ever known and are deserving of respect"</p>

Third, the tutors were asked to report what advice they would give to bilingual students about navigating the university (see Table 3). The majority of tutors responded with very encouraging messages that emphasize the idea of “believe in yourself.” Furthermore, several tutors mentioned the importance of knowing when to ask for help. Another two topics that emerged were the tutors telling the students that they are available to support them and that there are resources on campus that bilingual students can access.

**Table 3.** Answers to the question: “What advice would you give to bilingual students who are navigating school?”

<b>Topics (Instances)</b>	<b>Example Quotes</b>
Believe in yourself (19)	“YOU ARE AMAZINGLY TALENTED. Please continue learning and growing “
	“You are incredibly smart and brave to learn subjects in a language that isn’t your first”
	“They are brave and already a step ahead of most people for being bilingual”
Ask for help (8)	“Do not be afraid to ask for help”
	“That you’re awesome, smart, and you can do it! Also, to reach out for university resources if needed, and not to be nervous about reaching out.”
	“It’s okay to ask for help!”
You are supported (7)	“Don’t give up on your learning because there are people out there that are rooting for your success”
	“Don’t give up. We are here and we are cheering for you.”
	“You have support. You’re not alone. Even if I don’t understand your language I’ll help anyway I can.”

Topics (Instances)	Example Quotes
Resources for you (6)	<p>“Find a club to immerse yourself in. This will help with feeling included and be surrounded by people with similar interests.”</p> <p>“Take advantage of the resources available to you”</p> <p>“That They are always able to ask for help, and I would also tell them about the resources they can use if they don’t know about them yet”</p>
Miscellaneous (3)	<p>“Not everyone will be understanding”</p> <p>“that they are doing great and to not give up. to reach out if they need help.”</p> <p>“Don’t be afraid to speak up and practice always make a difference”</p>

An important goal for this project was to allow the tutors to share their own experiences. The conversations at the end of the training sessions were illuminating. Many of the key ideas from those discussions are included in the quotes presented in Tables 1 to 3. The training session was designed to emphasize university connectedness and cultural inclusion for bilingual students. The tutors understood the message and took it a step forward when providing suggestions for faculty and students. To improve academic satisfaction across campus, it is important to cultivate strong relationships between students, tutors, faculty, and staff. We are all in this together and collaboration is key to success.

## Discussion

The feedback from the tutors indicates that the goals of the training session were achieved. The tutors understood the key ideas from the evidence-based training and expanded on them when providing suggestions for faculty and students. Tutors are often our best and brightest students; they are a crucial resource on campus and providing them with the skills to build rich relationships is an effective way to have a wide impact. Universities have the responsibility to provide tutors with the skills and resources necessary to support all students on campus. Ensuring that bilingual students feel connected and included when attending their

tutoring sessions is a powerful way to improve their academic satisfaction. While this intervention was specifically designed for bilingual students, most tutoring tips discussed here are applicable to all students. Providing tutors with the skills and resources necessary to better connect with all students will increase levels of academic satisfaction across campus.

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