Language as Power: A Critical Analysis of Arizona's English Language Proficiency Standards

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Abstract

This policy analysis critiques the Structured English Immersion (SEI) program in Arizona, arguing that the 2019 English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) function as systemic barriers rather than tools for equity. While the program promotes principles such as asset-based expectations and integrated instruction, this analysis shows a fundamental conflict between these requirements and the linguistic reality of learners in the U.S.–Mexico border region. By connecting state policy to translanguaging as a literacy framework, this work examines how rigid models, such as the Pull-Out Model, prioritize monolingual compliance over learners' natural linguistic strengths. The article concludes that achieving true linguistic agency requires a shift from compliance-based assessment to principles that support the learner. Finally, this analysis shows how leveraging digital tools and research-based perspectives can help dismantle the state's reliance on rigid, time-based metrics.

Keywords

Structured English Immersion (SEI), Language Policy & Planning, Critical Literacy, Arizona English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS), Linguistic Agency, Translanguaging

This critical policy analysis examines Arizona's Structured English Immersion (SEI) program and demonstrates that its 2019 English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) create a structural conflict between state-mandated monolingualism and the linguistic agency of learners in the borderlands of the U.S. and Mexico. However, there is a disconnect between the vocabulary of these standards, such as Integrated Instruction and Targeted Language Development, and the lived linguistic realities of learners in the borderlands. This paper argues that Arizona's current SEI models prioritize a prescriptive, compliance-based monolingualism that serves as a systemic barrier to equity rather than a vehicle for success. To move beyond this deficit-oriented framework, policy must shift toward linguistic agency. Agency, in this sense, upholds the learner's right to define, value, and use their full linguistic repertoire, including Chicane Spanish and other regional vernaculars, as legitimate ways to engage in academic work.

Linguistic agency can be combined with translanguaging. While originally defined as the use of two languages for instruction (Williams, 1994), the field has since seen a "proliferation of terms" to describe similar practices, such as heteroglossia and codemeshing (MacSwan, 2017, pp. 170-171). These standards align with writerly reader frameworks that Pearson & Tierney (2021) describe as "transactions with our worlds as we engage with and contemplate meanings and their relevance to what we think or might do" (p. 94). However, their practical implementation often ignores the sociocultural realities of a classroom on the borderlands. True equity requires that Arizona move away from simple compliance and toward Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that center the learner's linguistic diversity. Reflecting on Combs (2012), this work contrasts the "principles of language acquisition" taught in university coursework with the conflicting agenda of the Arizona State Legislature (p. 67).

Constructivist frameworks that rely on invoking schemata to determine what is reasonable often remain incomplete when they fail to account for the power dynamics inherent in

literacy (Tierney & Pearson, 2021, p. 38). In opposition to this, linguistic agency can be used to truly begin addressing statist power imbalances that suppress learners' linguistic assets through a critical framework. Principles of linguistic agency center on what Makalela (2018) describes as interdependency; the result of the "infinite relationship of dependency as opposed to independence" within multilingual communication for 113,149 learners in the 2025-2026 school year (p. 491; Arizona Department of Education, 2026b). Interdependence, linguistic agency, and translanguaging work together to value the forms of communication that learners bring to the table.

The Arizona SEI program claims to leverage learners' linguistic knowledge, but scholarly research paints a more diverse picture. While MacSwan (2017) and Otheguy et al. (2015) argue that recognizing diverse linguistic backgrounds is important for a positive language identity, Arizona's current implementation often struggles to do so. This disparity is concerning because, as MacSwan (2017) states, "structured immersion and bilingual education are equally effective in promoting English language development" (p. 45). Applying this to the borderlands, it becomes clear that Arizona's inflexible adherence to immersion at the expense of multilingualism is a policy choice that ignores established efficacy in favor of bureaucratic submersion.

This exclusion is not an abstract policy failure; it is a direct act of erasure directed at specific speech communities. The program's failure to integrate these backgrounds is particularly evident regarding the systematic marginalization of African American Language (AAL; historically termed BEV or AAE), Chicane Spanish, Indigenous languages, and others which scholars have identified as sites for linguistic self-determination (Baker-Bell, 2013; McCarty & Lee, 2014; Smitherman, 1994; Valencia, 2008; Washington & Seidenberg, 2021; Zentella, 2024). As April Baker-Bell (2013) notes, with critical language pedagogy, "the goal is no longer to teach students to code-switch or merely use [African American Language] AAL as a bridge to add

[Dominant American English] DAE to their linguistic repertoires, which was a goal of the twentieth century" (Baker-Bell, 2013, p. 366). Without this critical interrogation, the SEI program prioritizes compliance over the linguistic choice of the learner.

Effective literacy instruction for ELLs requires integrating cognitive, social, and critical perspectives, as constructivist meaning-making, which relies on invoking prior knowledge structures to determine "what [constructivist readers] deem to be the most reasonable whole," is incomplete without attending to the social, cultural, and political processes and power dynamics inherent in literacy (Tierney & Pearson, 2021, pp. 37-41, 84, 111-134). This theoretical framework exposes a deep disconnect between student-centered literacy development and the state's assimilationist mandates. By forcing a monolingual definition of the "reasonable whole," Arizona's SEI policy does more than just prioritize English; it systematically disenfranchises the learner's voice, creating what Combs (2012) identifies as "'a confusing and contradictory amalgam" of pedagogical myths (p. 60). To move toward true linguistic agency, we must redefine reading and writing not just as acts of comprehension, but as acts of engaging with texts to validate one's own non-static linguistic identity and critical thought.

New Literacy Studies and the work of Noguerón-Liu (2020) argue that building homeschool partnerships is essential for supporting multilingual learners. This perspective challenges hierarchies that prioritize monolingualism and aligns with scholars who argue that valuing diverse linguistic backgrounds is a prerequisite for a positive language identity. Noguerón-Liu (2020) insists that educators must embrace heterogeneity to "leverage families' and communities' literacy knowledge," a process that involves "building an evidence-informed action plan for every reader" by amplifying the voices of learners who navigate multiple cultural spheres (p. S315). This framework provides a clear standard for evaluating whether Arizona's policies serve as tools for empowerment or as barriers to equity. When we hold the state's rigid

monolingual mandates up against the practices studied by Noguerón-Liu (2020), it becomes clear that these policies function as barriers to equity rather than tools for empowerment.

Compliance and Pedagogical Agency

Arizona's SEI program operationalizes its goals through four models: the Pull-Out Model; the Two-Hour Model; the Newcomer Model; and the 50-50 Dual Language Immersion Model. While these models are designed to structure language acquisition, their implementation often conflicts with the sociocultural and linguistic frameworks necessary for academic agency, as they frequently prioritize prescriptive linguistic compliance over the dynamic, truly assetbased practices required to support multilingual learners (Arizona Department of Education, 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d).

The four SEI models consistently treat student language as a static variable to be managed rather than a fluid resource to be cultivated. Otheguy et al. (2015) observe that isolated instruction fails to utilize "a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages" (p. 283). By separating learners, programs like the Pull-Out Model enforce an environment that contradicts the principles of translanguaging. The 2026 Arizona English Language Learner Assessment (AZELLA) revisions further entrench the assessment as a systemic barrier, defining proficiency as a "a sum of domain scores in Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing" (Arizona Department of Education, 2026a, p. 1). When instruction focuses on rigid time-based metrics with the AZELLA or specific instructional percentages, it risks prioritizing rote compliance over the critical rhetorical skills required for academic success.

True pedagogical agency requires moving beyond these structural limitations to honor the interdependence of multilingual communication. Makalela (2018) defines this as the "outcome of

an infinite relationship of dependency as opposed to independence" (p. 491). In contrast to this interconnectedness, current SEI models foster a culture of surveillance that mirrors the school-toprison pipeline; by prioritizing administrative compliance over linguistic agency, these programs effectively pathologize multilingual learners. This creates a systemic trajectory of exclusion, where the home language is labeled a deficit and the learner is primed for marginalization. The human cost of this policy is clear: in the 2024-2025 school year, 3.95% of ELs dropped out, and only 66.5% of the 2025 cohort graduated in four years, marking a cycle of failure that reflects the state's preference for policing language over supporting student potential (Arizona Department of
Education, 2025a).

When compared across districts, these numbers for ELs reveal significant variation in both outcomes and visibility. Tucson Unified School District reports 34% of learners as PreEmergent/Emergent, 33% Basic, 23% Intermediate, and 10% Proficient. Sunnyside High School, as part of Sunnyside Unified School District, reports 40% Pre-Emergent/Emergent, 28% Basic, 24% Intermediate, and 8% Proficient—the highest concentration of Pre-Emergent/Emergent learners and the lowest proficiency rate of any reportable school (excluding AltELPA) (Arizona Department of Education, 2025b). By contrast, Window Rock Unified School District, which serves learners on the Navajo Nation, reports 12% Pre-Emergent/Emergent, 30% Basic, 42%
Intermediate, and 16% Proficient, the strongest proficiency rate among the districts examined here. Data legibility is inconsistent: Baboquivari Unified School District #40 on the Tohono O'Odham Nation and the Arizona State Schools for the Deaf and the Blind appear in the 2025 dataset but contain no reportable proficiency percentages, as the Arizona Department of Education suppresses data for populations below reporting thresholds. These learners are counted

in the dataset but their outcomes are not reported. That Window Rock's data surfaces while Baboquivari's does not is itself a finding: suppression is not applied uniformly, and the communities rendered invisible by these thresholds are not interchangeable. This uneven legibility reflects how standardized ELP frameworks fail the communities most marginalized by Arizona's language education policies.

In practice, a classroom grounded in linguistic agency goes beyond these models by validating the learners' full linguistic varieties as legitimate modes of academic inquiry. Rather than utilizing translanguaging as a temporary bridge to English, a classroom like this encourages learners to navigate between home dialects, vernaculars, and standard Englishes as interconnected tools for critical thinking (Otheguy et al., 2015, p. 297). This shift moves the pedagogical focus from correcting language to creating an environment where the learner possesses the authority to choose the linguistic tools that best serve their communicative and cognitive goals. Upholding learners' agency, educators dismantle the monolingual barriers inherent in current SEI mandates and honor learners' roles as leaders of their education through curricula that prioritize the learners' own diverse linguistic and cultural expertise.

Imagine a classroom in a border community where a student recounts the 1917 Bath Riots, exploring how Carmelita Torres resisted the dehumanizing rhetoric of her era. Rather than restricting their narrative to formal English, the student utilizes a rich mix of Spanish, local regional dialects, and English to relay these events. A teacher driven by rigid rule-following might interrupt this narrative to correct the student’s grammar; in doing so, that teacher unknowingly replicates the same mechanisms of cultural surveillance that the original rioters were striving to overcome. In contrast, a teacher practicing linguistic agency recognizes this code-meshing as “nontraditional teaching methods and practices” (McCarty & Lee, 2014, p. 110). While the Bath Riots provide a sharp critique of xenophobia at the border, this student’s

performance reflects a broader sovereign praxis common among Indigenous learners in the borderlands. By reclaiming their full linguistic toolkit, the student asserts an identity that transcends the nation-state's artificial borders and monolingual mandates, directly challenging the "inconsistencies and contradictions" of policies that simultaneously create and foreclose spaces for Indigenous self-determination (Combs & Nicholas, 2012, p. 115). By allowing this space to exist as a counterstory (Martinez, 2020) to the state, the teacher moves beyond the goal of molding the student and begins to honor the learner as a leader in their own education.

Current compliance-based infrastructure strips IEPs of their transformative potential by treating them as administrative checkboxes rather than genuine, student-centered frameworks. This systemic failure is further evidenced by the state's ELPS, which relies on rigid metrics that fail to capture the nuanced growth of multilingual learners. For instance, the 2025 AZELLA data reveals that only 12% of ELLs achieved proficiency, a metric that functions as a tool for administrative oversight rather than a support for pedagogical growth (Arizona Department of Education, 2025b). This low success rate reflects a policy climate that actively marginalizes the diverse linguistic and cultural assets learners bring to their academic work. Forzani et al. (2022) argue that when frameworks reduce literacy to static performance, they miss critical opportunities to integrate a broader range of experiences and ways of expressing comprehension (p. 178). This failure creates an instructional vacuum that forces teachers to choose between rigid system adherence and the actual intellectual needs of their learners. By prioritizing compliance over the relational work identified by Gutiérrez et al. (2002) as necessary to "bolster the school's opportunity to develop and sustain additive environments," these mandates undermine the very learners they claim to serve (p. 338). Educators must resist this obsession with administrative data, using a wide range of analytic and instructional resources to dismantle these flawed assessments and restore space for learners to develop their own unique paths to knowledge.

Arizona's SEI program and the Science of Reading (SOR) framework share a common flaw: both treat literacy as a standardized, mechanical skill rather than a dynamic practice shaped by lived experience and linguistic identity. Yaden et al. (2021) identify this tendency in SOR as a reduction of literacy to a 'technical exercise' that ignores the situated knowledge learners bring to the classroom (p. S126). While SOR focuses on the mechanics of literacy, this reality neglects the lived experiences and identity-based stakes that learners bring into the room involving dimensions far more complex than a biological task. This narrow focus treats literacy as a static, universal skill rather than a dynamic practice that varies across contexts. The SOR framework's "unmitigated confidence" in a single, universal truth mirrors Arizona's ELP standards; both fail to help learners become "skillful, insightful readers of texts" (Yaden et al., 2021, pp. S124–S126). SOR must give them the tools to interrogate the world around them, including the power structures that demand they leave their native language at the classroom door. In this way, the SOR framework functions as a pedagogical counterpart to Arizona's SEI policy: both prioritize a standardized, mechanical version of literacy that inherently conflicts with the dynamic, multilingual reality of the borderlands.

The Digital and Global Waves

When viewed through the lens of linguistic agency, the state's digital tools function less as educational affordances and more as mechanisms of administrative surveillance. While scholars argue that integrating interactive communication tools is essential for modern literacy, Arizona's implementation of these tools through the 10 ELP Standards treats digital engagement as a static metric for monitoring compliance rather than a space for critical inquiry via the Cambium Assessment, Inc. (CAI) platform (Arizona Department of Education, n.d.; Leu et al., 2018). Although the state frames these digital standards as "not a curriculum" and intends to allow for instructional flexibility with this disclaimer, it fails to abdicate responsibility for classrooms in reality (Arizona Department of Education, 2019, slide 4). In practice, this

flexibility is illusory since genuine linguistic agency in a digital and globalized classroom demands learner self-determination and individualized learning pathways, both of which can't be accomplished through compliance-based infrastructure. While the IEP was designed to guarantee such personalization for disabled learners, current compliance-based infrastructure effectively strips these plans of their transformative potential, treating them as mere administrative checkboxes rather than genuine, student-centered frameworks applicable for all learners. Instead, a classroom rooted in linguistic agency would prioritize digital spaces where learners actively curate their own multimodal texts, translate across linguistic borders, and utilize digital tools to interrogate, rather than simply reproduce, standardized academic content.

The recent proliferation of AI-assisted literacy tools threatens to automate the cognitive struggle required for self-determining praxis. When state policies prioritize rote, time-based metrics, they pressure educators to adopt AI as an efficiency mechanism for compliance rather than a technology for critical inquiry. Arizona's reliance on inflexible standards like the AZELLA is not just outdated; it prevents learners from developing the critical literacy needed to assess automated intelligence, which is a requirement for 21st-century participation. As McCarty and Lee (2014) note, even when striving for sovereignty, schools must navigate "statedetermined monolingual norms monitored by English standardized tests" (p. 107). By prioritizing algorithmic efficiency over the "criss-crossing" of linguistic borders, the state denies learners the process required to develop a self-directed linguistic voice (Tierney & Pearson, 2021, p. 361). Consequently, current policy effectively transforms digital tools from sites of inquiry into instruments of surveillance that reinforce systemic barriers to equity.

To reclaim this lost agency, we must shift our pedagogical focus from automated output to intentional, human-centered practice. While writing activities like "revising with AI support fosters a culture of continuous learning," instructors must ensure these tools act as collaborators

rather than replacements for the student's own creative instincts (Lin et al., 2025, p. 17). Educators should instead curate a classroom environment where linguistic hybridity is centered as the primary means for cultivating student voice. This involves moving beyond simple navigation tasks toward assignments that require learners to mesh native vernaculars with English across both physical and digital spheres. By valuing these diverse skills, the student is positioned as the main agent of their education rather than an object of algorithmic correction. This pedagogical evolution transforms the classroom into a site of self-determination where learners define their own identities, prioritizing their authority over the limitations of statemandated metrics.

Toward Linguistic Agency and Practice

While Arizona's SEI program claims to value diversity, its reliance on rigid, compliancebased models creates a fundamental conflict with linguistic agency. Peled (2023) notes that "the legitimate linguistic sovereignty of host societies does not—and cannot—nullify the principle of equal linguistic dignity" by forcing learners to forgo their own agency (p. 594). Rather than treating home languages as deficits to be fixed, educators must adopt additive strategies such as code-meshing in literacy assignments and allowing learners to draft complex ideas in their home languages (Reyes, 2012, p. 321). To document this growth, schools should replace reductive standardized benchmarks with multimodal, portfolio-based assessments that capture a student's full linguistic repertoire, remove rigid instructional time mandates that prioritize compliance over learning, and implement linguistic IEPs that treat home languages as assets rather than deficits. As McCarty and Lee (2014) argue, genuine agency requires schools to be "accountable to the nations whose children they serve," necessitating a shift toward community-centered pedagogical goals (p. 102). This transition empowers learners to define their

own identities, transforming the classroom into a site of self-determination where linguistic hybridity is the primary engine of academic success.

Linguistic agency supports the inherent right of the student to define and utilize their full range of language skills as legitimate tools for academic work. By adopting the principles of translanguaging, educators can treat a student's entire linguistic repertoire as an integrated, fluid resource for complex meaning-making. This shift centers the student as the primary agent of their education while respecting their unique cultural identity. When implementing these changes, educators must "consider the dynamics of their own classroom (e.g., grade level, linguistic and cultural backgrounds [...] and content area) before implementing or modifying" critical language pedagogy (Baker-Bell, 2013, p. 366). To put this into practice, teachers should invite learners to use regional dialects and home vernaculars during peer-led inquiries and written brainstorming sessions. By recognizing that language is a cognitive and communal phenomenon, educators foster a classroom environment where self-determination drives academic success.

To change these practices, educators and policymakers must adopt an adaptable praxis that moves away from viewing classrooms as places to assess English proficiency and toward "culturally appropriate instructional events for minority children" (Au, 1980, p. 93). The classroom must become a space for the authentic exercise of identity where learners leverage their full linguistic range, such as regional Spanish and English blends, as complex cognitive tools for meaning-making. When educators validate these varieties, they honor the cultural knowledge learners bring to the classroom instead of ignoring it. For instance, when a student employs code-meshing to navigate regional Spanish, border vernacular, and academic English to layer meaning in a historical narrative, they are showcasing high-level rhetorical skill rather than a lack of proficiency. By prioritizing these authentic practices over rigid, compliance-based

standards, the school system honors a learner's linguistic intelligence and transforms the educational experience into a vehicle for self-determination and academic empowerment.

Finally, we must reform how we measure student success in our schools to reflect these values. True equity demands that we move away from measuring how well a student follows one specific set of monolingual rules. We should instead focus on measuring rhetorical flexibility in student work. This means evaluating a student's ability to strategically select the language or code that communicates their ideas most effectively in different situations. Rhetorical flexibility is essential for social mobility, supporting Anyon's (2005) view that "education policies for which we press would take on the larger issues: Education funding reform would include the companion need for financing neighborhood jobs and decent wages" (p. 83). By recognizing that literacy is tied to these structural economic realities, we must replace the current focus on compliance with a commitment to the learners' right to their own voice. However, translating these principles into practice requires acknowledging the theoretical constraints of this analysis.

Limitations

This critical policy analysis evaluating the 2019 ELP standards is primarily theoretical, grounded in critical literacy and sociolinguistic frameworks. While these frameworks provide a viewpoint for critiquing policy, this work relies on statewide aggregate data and existing literature rather than primary empirical data such as classroom observations or educator interviews. This analysis is limited by its primary focus on policy-level mandates; it does not account for the localized "subaltern" practices of teachers who may be actively resisting these structures to honor student agency within the classroom, as conceptualized by Gramsci (1971) and Spivak (1988). Nor does it account for the wide variation in how individual teachers and schools interpret and implement state mandates in daily practice. Consequently, the arguments

presented here are conceptual rather than based on direct implementation evidence from specific school districts. Rapidly evolving educational contexts also influence the relevance and application of this work's arguments.

Additionally, because the paper focuses on the broader structural challenges of the Arizona SEI program, it does not provide a comparative quantitative analysis of individualized student outcomes under the four different SEI models. Addressing this gap requires moving beyond policy-level critique to examine the practical effects of these models on the ground. Future research should prioritize ethnographic classroom studies to see how these theories of linguistic sovereignty function in actual instructional environments. These empirical insights would be a necessary next step to further validate the policy recommendations offered in this paper.

Conclusion

Arizona's reliance on rigid, compliance-based SEI models represents a fundamental misunderstanding of how language functions in the modern world. By prioritizing standardized instructional minutes and monolingual metrics, current policy treats multilingual learners as objects to be corrected. These policies fail to recognize learners as individuals with sophisticated and valuable communicative repertoires. This paper has argued that true equity in border communities requires more than superficial changes to classroom practice. It demands the dismantling of the deficit-based frameworks that undergird our current ELP standards. At the educator level, this shift requires ongoing sociolinguistic training designed to identify and unlearn deep-seated biases. By replacing the impulse to correct with the practice of listening, educators can transform their classrooms from sites of assimilation into spaces of linguistic

agency. This professional evolution ensures that pedagogical practice is driven by the learner's humanity rather than by compliance-based mandates.

To achieve linguistic agency, Arizona must move away from viewing the classroom as a site for linguistic assimilation. We must create a pedagogical practice that fully embraces regional vernaculars and home languages. These linguistic forms should be recognized not as obstacles to English proficiency, but as essential tools for critical inquiry and academic success. This shift profoundly changes the role of the educator. The teacher moves from being a compliance officer who polices the boundaries of language to a facilitator who validates the student's authority over their own voice.

Policy changes must move beyond the asset-based rhetoric that often fails to address deep power imbalances. We must replace the current obsession with standardized metrics and automated instructional tools with a commitment to human-centered literacy. This approach requires us to reject the idea that software or rigid time requirements can manage the complexity of student expression. We should instead focus on the authentic human connection that is necessary for deep learning. By placing the learner's right to their own linguistic identity at the center of our policy, we can create a more inclusive environment by shifting priorities from compliance to intelligibility.

Arizona can evolve from a system of surveillance to one of empowerment. This transformation requires educators and policymakers to acknowledge that language is a cognitive and community practice. We must provide teachers with the sociolinguistic training needed to identify and dismantle their own biases. When teachers learn to listen to learners rather than just correct them, the classroom becomes a site of resistance against assimilation. This training empowers educators to advocate for learners against the pressures of standardized, statemandated

metrics by institutionalizing ongoing professional development and extending the IEP framework to all learners, rather than limiting it to those with disabilities.

True equity is only possible when we honor the full humanity of every learner. This path requires accountability to educators' implementation of policies that respect learners as leaders of their own education despite rapidly changing educational contexts. We must stop demanding that learners leave parts of their identity at the classroom door. A system that values linguistic agency will produce more insightful, skillful, and critical thinkers. This is the promise of an education system that serves the needs of all learners in our interconnected, global reality.

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