

Embedding the Can Do Cycle throughout the School Year



Introduction

The Can Do Philosophy underpins all that we do at WIDA. This philosophy advocates for a shift away from a deficit-based approach—one focused on students’ limitations—toward an asset-based approach to working with multilingual learners. Promoting an asset-based approach broadens our view of multilingual students, helping us see them as agents of valuable resources that can be used to support their learning and enrich their learning community.

Educators have worked hard to make the Can Do Philosophy a more visible force within schools. We see this with the innovative use of tools that highlight what students *can do*—such as learner portfolios, student portraits, identity texts, and the ways different systems, such as Atlas and PowerSchool, are used to share information about students.

Culturally responsive teaching is “an educator’s ability to recognize students’ cultural displays of learning and meaning-making and respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold...”
Hammond, (2015).

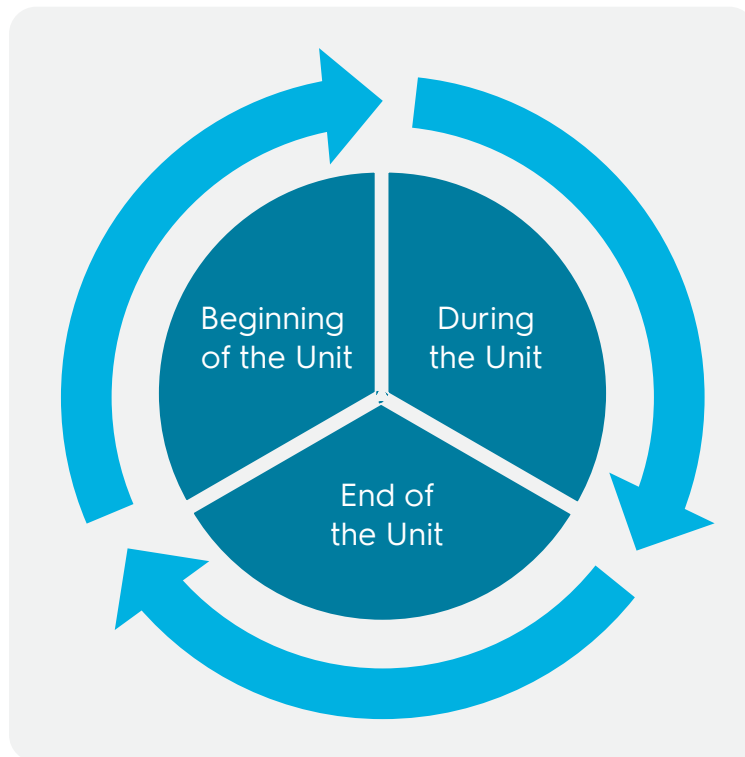
Eliciting, collecting, documenting, and sharing information is time-consuming and can be a source of frustration when the resources created to support student learning and share students' assets become the responsibility of a

single teacher or team of teachers. All students are all teachers' responsibility. Educators must work collaboratively to elicit and leverage student assets to support a strong community of learners who feel a sense of belonging. When we are able to implement the Can Do Philosophy by embedding it into our routine practices and habits in a way that centers students, we are engaging in culturally responsive teaching practices that will support all students, especially multilingual students.

WIDA Focus Bulletins are resources for practitioners and educators who support, instruct, and assess multilingual learners in Early Child Education and K-12 settings. To see other Focus Bulletins, please visit wida.wisc.edu/resources.

The Can Do Cycle: Integrating Student Assets All Year Long

At the beginning of the year, as you walk through schools around the world, you will see students participating in icebreakers and playing games. They are sharing information about themselves with their teachers and peers to build relationships with one another. The beginning of the school year is unlike any other part of the year. The nerves, the excitement, and the anticipation are running high for educators and students alike. This is when teachers are expected to take the time to really learn about their students. Being *intentional* is key. Those intentions are seen in the questions teachers ask, the observations they make, the notes they compile, and the ways they use the information they learn.



While the beginning of the year is an important time to build a foundational understanding of students, it's not enough. Since "the brain uses cultural information to turn everyday happenings into meaningful events," students' cultural and experiential assets must be considered every day of the year (Hammond, 2015, p. 22). Teachers can implement a cycle of actions that integrate students' assets into their yearlong teaching practices, using the Can Do cycle.

The Can Do cycle is a model for enacting practices related to the Can Do Philosophy throughout the school year. It helps educators expand on their current beginning-of-year practices. It also acknowledges that teachers' intentions when collecting and leveraging student assets will vary according to where they are in the academic school year and what is happening in the world. The illustration shows the Can Do cycle. The table highlights some intentions educators can keep in mind when implementing the Can Do cycle throughout different parts of a unit.

When	Why
Beginning of the Year	To build a warm and inviting learning environment
Beginning of the Unit	To plan units that integrate student assets to support the successful demonstration of unit learning goals
During the Unit	To leverage student assets, scaffold learning, and develop independent learners as the unit unfolds
End of the Unit	To reflect on the teaching and the learning and strengthen future practices

We will follow two teachers, Mx. Kim and Ms. Smitty, as they collaborate to plan and deliver lessons that intentionally embed the Can Do cycle into their teaching practices, in order to integrate content, language, and student assets into their teaching and learning experiences all year long.

Mx. Kim is an English as an additional language (EAL) teacher who supports all fifth-grade multilingual students who require extra language support. Ms. Smitty is a fifth-grade language arts teacher.



Mx. Kim



Ms. Smitty

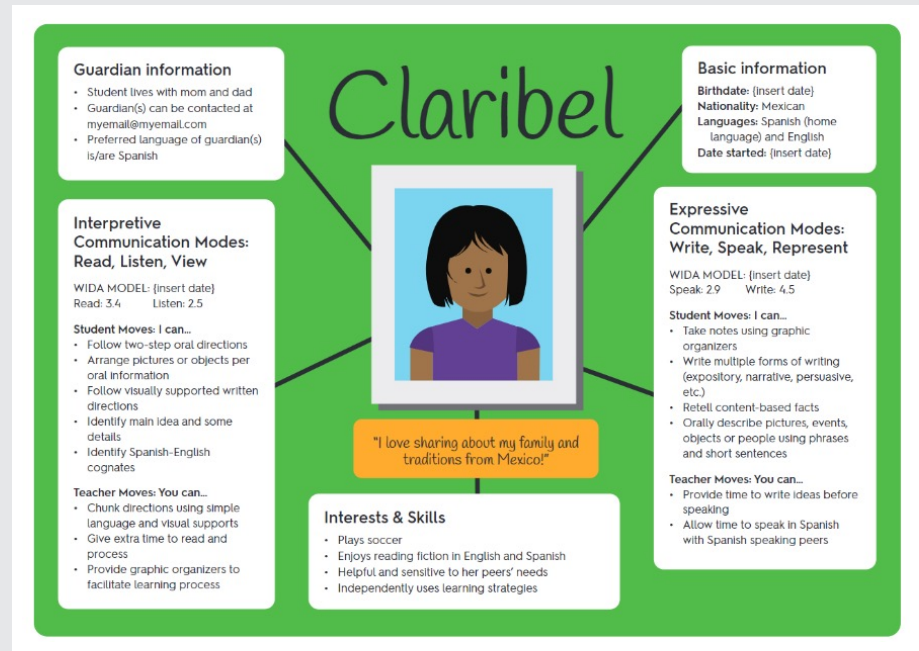
Implementing the Can Do Cycle at the Beginning of the Year

As part of their beginning-of-year responsibilities, Mx. Kim has shared some incoming fifth-grade multilingual student portraits with other fifth-grade teachers. They discussed the portraits in more detail with one of their collaborative teaching partners, Ms. Smitty. Ms. Smitty thought student portraits were wonderful but was unsure how she would use them to inform her teaching practices.

Mx. Kim and Ms. Smitty reflected on the information provided in the student portraits to build a foundational understanding of the assets their multilingual learners brought to the classroom. For example, the teachers noticed that they have five languages represented in the class and have students from eight different countries. They also noticed patterns across their students' extracurricular interests. As Mx. Kim and Ms. Smitty engaged with the information acquired from the student portraits and ice-breaker activities, they thought about what they could do to immediately include student assets, such as displaying signage welcoming students to the class and seeking literature for the class library that reflects their different languages. Mx. Kim and Ms. Smitty also identified the assets they want to engage with throughout the school year:

- Multilingualism
- Multiculturalism
- Strong sense of community
- Home literacy experiences

Student portraits emerged as an asset-based alternative to student data profiles (where students were reduced to data points). Student portraits go beyond showing test scores to emphasizing academic and social skills, as well as interests and experiences. They can also provide a brief snapshot of how students interact with different environments including their home, school, and communities.



Implementing the Can Do Cycle at the Beginning of a Unit

To leverage the students' strong sense of community, Mx. Kim shared the idea of a community quilt with Ms. Smitty. Rather than individual student portraits, where educators view students' assets independently from each other and from the content of a unit, a community quilt unites the collective experiences, interests, and tacit knowledge in a way that is connected to the content and visible to everyone.

Ms. Smitty's upcoming unit standards focused on identifying the elements of plot and specifying the main ideas and supporting details of a fiction text. In the past, she began this unit by reading a picture book aloud, having students recall those events, and then using that information to teach the elements of plot. This year, inspired by her collaborative conversations with Mx. Kim, she was excited to begin the unit by tapping into her students' interests, experiences, and linguistic assets. To prepare for the first couple days of the unit, Ms. Smitty met with Mx. Kim to discuss how they might edit this unit plan to bridge the content to their students.

They started by identifying the content and language goals for the unit by looking at their content learning goals, major learning activities, and summative assessment tasks. Afterwards, Mx. Kim shared with Ms. Smitty some resource banks of ideas they could use as they built a unit that centers students' assets and connects student identities with the content. The beginning-of-unit resource bank highlights what teachers might consider in their collaborative conversations on building culturally responsive units and what students can reflect on as they begin to engage in the unit content.

The resource bank inspired some questions specific to the upcoming unit that they could use to elicit small group conversations and to learn more about how their students' interests and experiences related to the topic of the unit:

- What types of stories do you enjoy? Why? How are they told? (text, oral, images, other media)
- What does storytelling look and sound like in your families? Who is a great storyteller? What makes them a great storyteller?
- In what languages do you read, listen to, and write stories?

Once these questions were discussed, students were asked to share their answers on a sticky note that worked as a "quilt square," and was placed on the wall dedicated to their unit's community quilt. The sentence frames below were provided to support their shared ideas.

- You should talk to me if you want to know more about...
- I am excited to learn more about...
- Storytelling is important to my family because...
- In my family, storytelling looks like...and sounds like...
- My favorite types of stories are...

Beginning-of-Unit Resource Bank

What assets, interests, and experiences will we elicit at the beginning of the unit to support the bridging of content to students' identities?

Assets	Sample questions for teachers to consider	Sample questions for students to consider (Scaffold questions as needed)
Linguistic	<p>How are students being asked to use language?</p> <p>What are the language goals?</p> <p>Where are the opportunities to leverage translanguaging in the unit?</p>	<p>In what languages have you spoken and written on this topic?</p> <p>In what languages have you read or heard about this topic? (Literature, podcasts, audiobooks, etc.)</p> <p>What connections (songs, movies, media or books) do you have with this topic?</p>
Experiential	<p>How does this relate to previous units?</p> <p>What technology do they already use? Enjoy using?</p> <p>Where are the opportunities to bridge students' experiences to the content of this unit?</p>	<p>What experiences do you have related to this topic?</p> <p>What connections does your family have to the topic?</p> <p>How have you learned about this topic? (Through texts, personal encounters, media, etc.)</p> <p>Where have you heard about this (unit topic) before? What do you remember?</p>
Cultural	<p>What are some cultural or historical connections?</p> <p>Where are the opportunities to bridge students' cultures and identities to the content of this unit?</p> <p>Who in my students' current communities can provide my class with more opportunities to learn the content of this unit from multiple perspectives?</p>	<p>What are some of your home/community experiences related to this topic?</p> <p>How does this topic relate to something in your community (family and friends)?</p> <p>How does the topic impact your community (family and friends)?</p> <p>How does your community (family and friends) impact this topic?</p>
Social/ Emotional	<p>What questions do the students have on the topic?</p> <p>How do students feel about the topic?</p> <p>How does this topic impact the local community?</p> <p>Where are the opportunities to bridge students' interests to the content of this unit?</p>	<p>Why should we care about (an issue related to the unit topic)?</p> <p>What questions do you have about (an issue related to the unit topic)?</p> <p>How does (an issue related to the unit topic) make you feel?</p> <p>What other perspectives related to this unit do you find valuable?</p>

Implementing the Can Do Cycle During the Unit

A top priority for Mx. Kim and Ms. Smitty was to use the information they gathered from their students to build units that valued their identities, experiences, and interests. To do this, they reflected on the community quilt to consider the literacy practices the students brought to the unit. They noticed there were a mixture of oral, written, and kinesthetic traditions of storytelling. Looking at the resource bank of questions, they considered ways they could integrate the diverse literacy practices, experiences, and languages of their students throughout the unit. They also considered some additional conversations among students that they may want to facilitate throughout the unit.

Mx. Kim and Ms. Smitty decided to leverage the literacy practices and experiences by:

- Inviting students to bring in a story (written, oral, or imagery) or perform a story that is important to them or to their families.
- Building a classroom community library of books and other literary resources connected to students’ interests, identities, and languages.
- Providing opportunities for students to share information on their “quilt square” to connect them with other students and to add information when other ideas come up.

During-Unit Resource Bank

How can we leverage student assets to scaffold learning and develop independent learners as the unit unfolds?

Sample questions for teachers to consider	Sample questions for students to consider
<p>How will I integrate student assets/interests/experiences/identities into the physical/virtual learning environment?</p> <p>How will I ensure that students engage in multiple modes of communication to understand new content and communicate what they’ve learned?</p> <p>How might I leverage student assets to engage them in collaboration?</p> <p>How might I use information about my students to teach learning strategies and build necessary scaffolds?</p> <p>How might I share pertinent information about my students to build them up as the center of the context of learning?</p> <p>How might I leverage student assets to help them build the metacognition and metalinguistic skills necessary to independently use learning strategies?</p> <p>How might I encourage students to use their multilingualism and other linguistic assets throughout the unit by engaging in translanguaging?</p>	<p>What peers might you want to connect with around these topics?</p> <p>What family members might you want to connect with around these topics?</p> <p>How can you connect your knowledge, experiences, interests, and skills to this unit?</p> <p>What learning strategies do you need to use to succeed in the unit content and language goals?</p> <p>What language choices are you making to engage in the content?</p> <p>What members of your community do you want to hear from on this topic?</p>

Implementing the Can Do Cycle at the End of a Unit

Nearing the end of the unit, Ms. Smitty and Mx. Kim looked through the end-of-unit resource bank to consider ways to assess and reflect on student engagement. They thought about how they could create opportunities for all students to share their understanding of the unit’s learning goals. Upon reflection, they noticed that the assessment tasks were often teacher-driven and highlighted students’ gaps in knowledge. This time, the teachers wanted to engage in assessment practices that were co-constructed and highlighted what students were learning. “By leveraging students’ everyday experiences, interests, and concerns to set up a meaningful assessment task, teachers can increase opportunities for students to participate in the work meaningfully” (Kang, 2021).

Considering their students’ experiences, Mx. Kim and Ms. Smitty had students create identity texts. Identity texts are artifacts of students’ experiences and knowledge that can be written, spoken, sung, or delivered in other kinesthetic or multimodal ways (Cummins et al., 2015). To demonstrate their understanding of plot, main idea, and supporting details, the students shared a story that reflected their interests, experiences, and languages and connected the elements of each other’s stories to the content learning goals of the unit. Following the unit assessment, but before moving on to the next unit, **the students reflected on their learning experiences throughout the unit to think about what and how they learned. Ms. Smitty and Mx. Kim used their students’ reflections and their own reflections to develop ideas to continue improving teaching and learning in future units.**

End-Of-Unit Resource Bank

How can we create assessment tasks that legitimize and celebrate diverse ways of thinking and doing in order to demonstrate understanding of learning goals?

Sample questions for teachers to consider	Sample questions for students to consider
<p>How did the assessment reveal (rather than conceal) what students know?</p> <p>How were the criteria for successfully demonstrating learning culturally and linguistically appropriate for all students? (i.e., rubrics and mode of communication)</p> <p>Were there opportunities to leverage students’ linguistic, cultural, experiential, and social-emotional assets to demonstrate their learning in the end-of-unit assessment?</p> <p>How were students involved in the assessment process (assessment tools, data collection, interpretation of results)?</p>	<p>How was this unit important to/connected to your cultural identity(ies)?</p> <p>How did the teacher’s instructional practices value the knowledge and experiences you bring to the learning community? How could it be improved?</p> <p>In what ways were you able to demonstrate what you learned on the end-of-unit assessment? What are some other ways you could have demonstrated your learning that were not included in the assessment?</p>

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Jennifer Hammer, a high school EAL teacher with Moses Lake School District, in Washington, and Mónica Farris an elementary EAL teacher with the Russellville School District, in Alabama, identified the challenges they faced when shifting towards a more communal way of viewing students’ educational experiences. They learned that when all teachers are committed to teaching all students, both teachers and students benefit. They also realized that families and the local community can also serve as important resources for supporting students’ academic and personal development. See the table below for some of the challenges they faced and some of the changes they made to transform those challenges into opportunities to apply innovative strategies.

Shifting from “my students” to “our students”

Challenges	Changes
<p>Communicating with multilingual families</p>	<p>Mónica Farris added an aural component to previously text-only communications with families of multilingual students after realizing that many families her school served came from varying Mayan dialects that valued oral communication over written.</p> <p><i>“The impact of shifting from a purely written communication to both written and oral communication has resulted in parents becoming more involved and engaged in their children’s education and expressing their understanding in state assessments, student growth, and performance data.” -Mónica Farris</i></p>
<p>Viewing the local community as a resource</p>	<p>Mónica Farris worked hard to have her students’ cultures and languages reflected in the learning community, but she wanted to build a closer connection between school practices and the community. She did this by building relationships with the local markets in the area that her students frequented and has used those spaces to display student work so that students can see their schoolwork being celebrated in the community.</p> <p><i>“Multilingual learners are an asset to schools and bring a plethora of experiences that prepare the rest of the school population to better function in a global society. Multilingual learners bring the world to classrooms!” -Mónica Farris</i></p>
<p>Empowering teachers with the resources and skills necessary to teach multilingual students</p>	<p>Jennifer Hammer encountered a teacher nervous to have developing multilingual students in their class. Jennifer was able to demonstrate how to use multilingualism as an asset by sitting students together who support one another using their home languages and by introducing the teacher to ideas and tools that could help them integrate language learning into their content-driven lessons.</p> <p><i>“I have to believe in my teachers as much as I believe in my students.” -Jennifer Hammer</i></p>

Addressing Challenges through Collaboration

In spite of our intentions and efforts to build inclusive learning environments, our efforts can start to unravel when they are not mirrored by the rest of the school. Teaching is a collaborative experience, even when it feels isolating. Although some classrooms can work as sanctuaries for students who may struggle in different classes, it is more important that the school, as a whole, feels like a safe place to learn and grow. When all teachers in a school see all learners, including multilingual learners, as everyone's responsibility, collaboration evolves naturally. Close collaboration challenges the idea that students belong to a single teacher. Seeing specific students as "mine" or "yours" hinders students from feeling a sense of belonging. If all teachers are language teachers and all teachers are responsible for all students, EAL teachers aren't the only ones responsible for gathering and leveraging student assets. Instead, we are all positioned to reflect on the practices that we need to develop as educators to best support a diverse demographic of learners.

Conclusion

The WIDA Can Do Philosophy is a powerful ideology and a starting point for centering our intentions on an asset-based approach to teaching multilingual learners. More importantly, intentions need to turn into actions that create impact. We acknowledge that the iterative yearlong process of gathering and building on student assets is not a simple process. Mx. Kim and Ms. Smitty provided some examples of how collaboration supported them on their journey of building on their existing unit planning practices to engage in a Can Do cycle of action. The resource banks provided throughout the Focus Bulletin can serve as a helpful guide to implementing actions that build on student assets, interests, and experiences to serve as a bridge to learning. We encourage you to reflect on the example questions provided in the resource banks and consider how they may be edited and scaffolded to suit the needs of your students and the content of the unit.

Bibliography

- Cummins, J., Hu, S., Markus, P., & Montero, M. K. (2015). Identity texts and academic achievement: Connecting the dots in multilingual school contexts. *Tesol Quarterly*, 49(3), 555–581.
- Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin Press.
- Kang, H. & Furtak, E. M. (2021). Learning theory, classroom assessment and equity. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, 40(3), 73–82.
- WIDA. (2019). *Can do philosophy*. <https://wida.wisc.edu/teach/can-do>



Authors

Maya A. Martinez-Hart
Professional Learning Specialist
WIDA

Christina Nelson
Professional Learning Specialist
WIDA International School
Consortium

Voices from the Field Contributors

Mónica Farris, EdS, NBCT
EL Teacher
Russellville School District

Jennifer Hammer
ELD Teacher
Moses Lake School District

WIDA Focus Bulletin Staff

Jen Daniels
Rebecca Holmes
Janet Trembley

We dedicate this Focus Bulletin to the memory of our beloved colleague and friend, Troy Dassler. Troy had a unique ability to recognize the assets of students and educators to create connections and community. His commitment to teaching and learning and his creativity inspired innovations like the community quilt which makes students' assets visible. His legacy lives on through the students and teachers he met and inspired.