

**Planting the Seeds of Inclusivity: Middle School FFA Peer Translation Program for ELL Students in Alabama**

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## **Planting the Seeds of Inclusivity: Middle School FFA Peer Translation Program for ELL Students**

The education of English Language Learners (ELLs) is among the fastest-growing groups in U.S. schools (Salem et al., 2023). The rapid growth has yielded limited research on the relationship between Hispanic youth and school-based agricultural education (SBAE) (Barajas et al., 2020). Jansen (2008) reported that teacher preparation lacks resources for addressing practical student translation needs. Less than 30% of classroom educators are prepared to serve ELL students in their classrooms (Barajas et al., 2020; Echevarria et al., 2006; Short, 2013). Adequate preparation and instruction do not exclude SBAE teachers. Sparse resources, translation services, and inadequate teacher training contribute to low Hispanic diversity in SBAE programs (Barajas et al., 2020) and low high school graduation rates (Sólorzano et al., 2005). Language barriers and the lack of accessible translation services present challenges that school systems and SBAE teachers cannot easily overcome. SBAE teachers and agricultural education programs often address ELL needs independently and without access to best practices. The deficiencies experienced by many SBAE ELL programs consistently strive toward what Elliott and Lambert (2018) distinctly described as an "equal for all" approach addressing language, student backgrounds, and cultural biases. Need often necessitates innovation, and Albertville middle school in Alabama has developed culturally progressive solutions to better serve their ELL SBAE students and current and potential FFA members. Local FFA chapter officers were concerned that potential ELL FFA members could not fully participate in chapter meetings and FFA opportunities in their middle school program. To address this inequality, FFA officers and their chapter advisors developed a new program to utilize the skills and talents of current chapter FFA members as translators to create a more inclusive environment for ELL members. The program was launched during the 2024 National FFA Week at Albertville Middle School. This innovative work acknowledges the student's designation of Hispanic descent. We use the descriptive term Hispanic to honor their ancestry identity and provide writing consistency.

### **How It Works**

During National FFA Week, middle school FFA and agricultural education program recruitment opportunities were presented to seventh-grade students at Albertville many of whom (56.4%) are English language learners (nces.ed.gov, n.d). The chapter advisor and middle school FFA chapter officers cooperatively developed a fully inclusive recruitment presentation to promote the FFA program. Previously, potential ELL FFA members were often disengaged and needed help to fully comprehend the opportunities available, primarily in response to language barriers. The chapter advisor identified and recruited three current FFA members fluent in Spanish to develop a student-driven and locally developed approach to integrate Spanish into the seventh-grade recruitment presentation. During the development of the recruitment program, Spanish-speaking FFA members advised and reviewed the student-developed presentation to address cultural sensitivity, language appropriateness, inclusivity, and answering questions. Chapter officers presented the trial presentation to bilingual, Spanish, and English learners. After the trial

presentation, bilingual students evaluated the pilot participants' input and translated the English-only presentation into Spanish. The three Spanish-speaking FFA members presented the recruitment presentation entirely in Spanish for ELL students. After the recruitment presentation, English language-only speakers could better communicate with ELL students through the bilingual middle school FFA members. These students bridged the language barrier that once prevented inquiry and discussion by translating questions, sharing experiences, and promoting the benefits of the FFA without the fear of miscommunication or cultural misunderstanding. Pseudonyms were to participating students.

### **Results to Date**

"I felt like students [ELL] had an opportunity for once to go to a class that welcomes you for how you are and not knowing the English language." Middle school bilingual FFA members identified barriers preventing inclusive opportunities for all Albertville agricultural education students and potential FFA members. The results of chapter officers serving as translators increased Hispanic student interest in agriculture and FFA members entering the ninth grade. Hispanic students reported feeling included and welcomed in the program, encouraging them to enroll in secondary SBAE and FFA. Without ELL peers identifying barriers, potential students and members would have been unaware of the opportunities in their future. When students providing translation services were asked to describe the program, Elizabeth, a 14-year-old eighth grader, recognized the need for a dual language program in her FFA chapter. Her motivation stemmed from her experiences as an ELL student, "When I was growing up and still learning English, I felt left out because I didn't know English like the other students." She explained, "I saw other students participating in FFA [CDE/LDE] activities, but I couldn't because I didn't understand what they were doing. The results of this program have created linguistic and cultural bridges between ELL's and English language-based instruction. Elizabeth believes developing and implementing the translation program will encourage students to be involved and welcome. These student experiences reinforce Clemons et al. (2022) findings that ELL students learn best when interacting with their peers and environment. Because of the peer-designed translation program, four ELL participants were elected to a chapter office. These students credited the translation program as the progenitor of their motivation to become involved in the FFA program.

### **Future Plans**

The future of this innovation includes planned research into the ELL platform and how integration is effective in Agriscience Education and Career Tech Education. The results of this innovative program will be shared with Alabama legislators during the 2025 legislative session when funding for state-wide school-based translation services will be brought to the floor for discussion and consideration.

### **Cost(s)**

This program relied on the skills and talents of individuals dedicated to improving agricultural education in Alabama. No costs were incurred beyond contractual obligations.

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