AAC for Multilingual Learners

Presenters: Alan Vu, MA, CCC-SLP, Maria De Leon M.S., CCC-SLP, and Vianca Ocampo, MA, CCC-SLP/L

Content Coordinators: Andrea N. Pluskota, MS, CCC-SLP and Jaime Van Echo, M.S. CCC-SLP

Developed and produced by **ASHA Professional Development**

What This Course *Is*—and *Isn't*

This course *is*

- A curated conversation with three professionals
- Lightly edited interviews for clarity and flow
- Story-driven, sharing strategies through real-world examples

This course *isn't*

- A polished seminar or scripted lecture
- A traditional slide-heavy training

Alan Vu, MA, CCC-SLP

Disclosures:

- Financial compensation from ASHA for this presentation
- Founder and CEO of Flexspeak, an AAC company
- Alan is a person who stutters and brings lived experience with communication disabilities to his work

Maria De Leon MS, CCC-SLP

Disclosures:

- Founder and Clinical Director of Voces AAC
- Co-founder of bilingue AAC
- SLP for a nonprofit organization in California
- Financial compensation from ASHA for this presentation
- ASHA member
- Member of California Speech Language Hearing Association (CSHA)
- ASHA SIG 12 affiliate

Vianca Ocampo, MA, CCC-SLP

Disclosures:

- Financial compensation from ASHA for this presentation
- Recipient of the 2023 ASHA Students Preparing for Academic-Research Careers (SPARC) Award

Your Course Toolkit

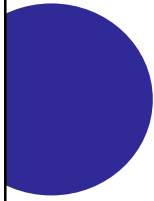**Handouts** – Found in the course menu

Reflection Activities – Pause and apply what you learn

Key Takeaway Slides – Summarize big ideas

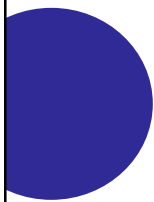**Helpful Links & Resources** – Explore more, if you'd like

First Experience with AAC

Interview Question:

"Tell us about your first experience working with AAC users."

Guiding Principles for Supporting Bilingual AAC Users

Interview Question:

"In your work, what would you say are three values, principles, or tenets that are most important?"

Alan's Response — Principle 1

Start with a Bilingual AAC System

Key Idea
Always include the user's heritage language from the beginning.

Alan's Response — Principle 1

- Retrofitting a monolingual system into a bilingual one is resource-intensive.

- In engineering terms, this creates "technical debt"—shortcuts now lead to more work later.

- Customizing AAC for multilingual users may include:
    - Recording native speaker audio
    - Adjusting vocabulary tiles and layouts

- Starting bilingual helps avoid these issues and supports long-term success.

Alan's Response — Principle 2

Involve the Family at Every Step

Key Idea
Sustainable AAC use depends on family empowerment and collaboration.

Alan's Response — Principle 2

- AAC abandonment is often a systems issue—not user fault.

- Success requires:
  - Buy-in from family, clinicians, educators, and the user.

- Barriers:
  - Some professionals restrict family programming access.
  - Multilingual families may face language-based exclusion.

Alan's strategies:

- Invite communication in the family's preferred language.

- Use translation tools and interpreters.

- Translate handouts and visuals into the home language.

- Collaborate with families on real-life vocabulary (e.g., routines, interests).

"If you're more comfortable writing to me in Indonesian, do it. I have tools to translate and respond in your language."

Alan's Response — Principle 3

Center Student-Led Therapy

Key Idea
Use the student's interests as a foundation for communication growth.

Alan's Response — Principle 3

- Motivation leads to better outcomes—work with what excites the student.

- Therapy goals are often flexible enough to adapt to personal contexts.

- 1:1 and small group settings allow for personalization that large classrooms can't.

Alan's approach

•*Adjust content to reflect the student's life.*

•*Embed goals into preferred activities (e.g., K-pop, family routines).*

A Holistic Approach

Alan's Key Takeaways

• Choose bilingual tools early to avoid setbacks.

• Bring families into the process—don't gatekeep AAC.

• Make therapy engaging and personal.

• Equity means meeting families where they are, using tools and flexibility to ensure full access.

Maria's Response — Principle 1

Center the Family and the Individual

Key Idea
The family and AAC user must be at the heart of everything we do.

Maria's Response — Principle 1

- Every interaction—whether assessment, intervention, or coaching—should begin with the lived experiences of the family and the individual.

- A collaborative approach fosters mutual learning; the professional is not the sole expert.

- Respecting the expertise that families bring ensures that interventions are both meaningful and sustainable.

- Effective support emerges from dialogue, not direction.

Maria's Response — Principle 2

Follow the Research — and Stay Current

Key Idea
Evidence-based practices are essential, especially when serving linguistically diverse communities.

Maria's Response — Principle 2

- Sound decision-making relies on current, peer-reviewed research—even when literature is still emerging.

- A commitment to evidence doesn't mean being static. What's effective for one population or time period may shift as new findings emerge.

- Continuous review of new scholarship helps refine intervention strategies and adapt to the evolving needs of multilingual users.

Maria's Response — Principle 3

Embrace Learning — and Unlearning

Key Idea
Growth means recognizing when to let go of outdated practices.

Maria's Response — Principle 3

- Relying solely on core vocabulary may not meet the needs of all users—especially younger children who benefit from more context-specific, noun-based language.

- Strict adherence to frameworks without considering age, development, or motivation can limit progress.

- Culturally responsive practice means avoiding assumptions; families from the same background may have different values or routines.

- Releasing these assumptions opens the door to more personalized, authentic engagement.

Key Takeaways

- Centering the user and their family leads to more grounded, effective intervention.

- Research must guide the work—but flexibility is essential.

- Professional growth involves examining biases, questioning practices, and staying open to change.

- True cultural responsiveness isn't about fitting families into categories—it's about meeting them where they are.

Vianca's Response — Principle 1

Honor All Forms and Languages of Communication

Key Idea
Every method and language used for communication is valid and worth celebrating.

Vianca's Response — Principle 1

- Communication through gestures, manual signs, vocalizations, AAC devices, and heritage languages should be equally accepted and affirmed.

- Expressive diversity must be encouraged in all settings—school, clinic, home—regardless of the dominant spoken language in the environment.

- Celebrating all communication reinforces the user's agency and encourages more frequent, confident interaction.

Vianca's Response — Principle 2

There Are No Prerequisites for AAC

Key Idea
Every individual has the right to access AAC—no skill, behavior, or benchmark should act as a gatekeeper.

Vianca's Response — Principle 2

- The belief that someone must "earn" AAC access by demonstrating certain skills undermines the core purpose of AAC.

- Common misconceptions (e.g., "they're verbal" or "they have behaviors") should not delay or deny access.

- AAC can:
  - Reduce frustration and behavioral challenges.
  - Supplement speech in moments of fatigue or low intelligibility.

- Meeting individuals where they are means offering AAC early, not after a checklist is completed.

Vianca's Response — Principle 3

Collaboration is Key

Key Idea
Effective AAC support depends on a collaborative network—including the client, family, educators, therapists, and the broader community.

Vianca's Response — Principle 3

- Strong AAC implementation draws on:
  - Families' knowledge and involvement
  - Teachers' and peers' openness
  - Community resources and professional mentorship

- True inclusion is supported by a shared effort:
  - Classroom accommodations (e.g., visuals, lanyards, boards)
  - Personalized device setups (e.g., voice, color, familiar visuals)
  - Ongoing communication between home and school

- Empowering the user to choose how, when, and where to communicate is a collective responsibility.

Key Takeaways

- Every communicative attempt matters—regardless of form or language.

- AAC is a right, not a privilege—access should never be conditional.

- When communities rally around the AAC user, the results are transformative.

- The goal is not just access to a tool—but access to connection, clarity, and self-expression.
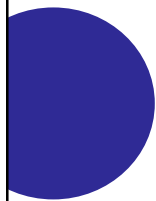
Day-to-Day Challenges in AAC Work

Interview Question:

"What are some of the biggest challenges you face in your day-to-day work?"

Maria's Response — Barrier #1

Systemic Opportunity and Access Barriers

Key Idea
Attitudes, myths, and knowledge gaps persist—especially around bilingual AAC.

Maria's Response — Barrier #1

- Participation Model highlights opportunity and access barriers.

- Widespread misconceptions about bilingualism and AAC still exist.

- Cultural responsiveness adds complexity to already fragile systems.

- Advocacy and education are constant needs.

Maria's Response — Barrier #2

Coaching Requires Emotional Intelligence

Key Idea
It's not what you say—it's how you connect.

Maria's Response — Barrier #2

- Coaching can feel like criticism if not approached thoughtfully.

- Professionals and families bring emotional and practical baggage.

- Building **rapport** and showing **empathy** fosters trust.

- Advice must feel **doable**, not overwhelming.

Maria's Response — Barrier #3

Addressing Bilingualism Misconceptions

Key Idea
Many still believe bilingual AAC is too much for a child with a disability.

Maria's Response — Barrier #3

- Common myth: "Two languages will confuse them."

- Reality: Language is one system—bilingualism is natural.

- Clarifying this builds caregiver confidence.

- Families must see bilingual AAC as **valid and possible**.

Maria's Response — Barrier #4

Device Limitations & Operational Hurdles

Key Idea
Even when the mindset shifts, the tech can still be a challenge.

Maria's Response — Barrier #4

- Toggling languages can be confusing and inconsistent.

- Many devices aren't user-friendly for code-switching.

- Resistance may be due to confusion—not lack of will.

- Practice and modeling make toggling feel easier.

Maria's Takeaways

Coaching with Care

- Changing minds starts with **connection**.

- Success means small, steady shifts in habits and understanding.

- Change happens person by person—through patience, empathy, and modeling.

Vianca's Response — Barrier #1

Pushback and Access Gaps in Implementation

Key Idea
Resistance—whether from staff, families, or systems—is common, but it can be addressed through empathy and education.

Vianca's Response — Barrier #1

- Pushback is ongoing: from admins, educators, or families.

- Devices often go unused—left in backpacks, uncharged, or sidelined.

- Change begins by **meeting people where they are**.

- Modeling AAC use in real classrooms builds visibility and comfort.

- Peer modeling and open use help normalize AAC in shared spaces.

Vianca's Response — Barrier #2

Limited Language Access in AAC Devices

Key Idea
Lack of linguistic diversity in AAC systems leaves many users underserved.

Vianca's Response — Barrier #2

• Translation alone isn't enough—languages differ in **syntax**, **structure**, and **core vocabulary**.

• Most AAC systems are built for English—limiting access for non-English speakers.

• There's a need for **language-specific AAC tools** (e.g., Tagalog speech-generating devices).

• Systemic change will require collaboration between practitioners, researchers, and developers.

AAC must evolve to serve a globally diverse population.

Vianca's Takeaways

Normalize, Innovate, Empower

- Normalize AAC use through visibility, modeling, and inclusion.

- Push beyond translation—create systems truly built for diverse languages.

- Empower communities to lead innovation from the ground up.

- Real access means linguistic access, too.

Alan's Response — Barrier #1

Getting Buy-In from Stakeholders

Key Idea
Collaboration can't happen without investment from everyone involved.

Alan's Response — Barrier #1

- Staff and families may not fully understand AAC's purpose.

- Lack of engagement leads to low usage or resistance.

- Involving them directly in sessions builds understanding and trust.

- Demonstrating **reciprocal, enjoyable communication** reframes AAC beyond testing or quizzing.

Alan's Response — Barrier #2

Limited Time and High Caseloads

Key Idea
Heavy workloads make individualized AAC support difficult to sustain.

Alan's Response — Barrier #2

- Time constraints are a widespread challenge among SLPs and AAC specialists.

- High caseloads often outpace available time and resources.

- Efficient workflows are essential—especially when managing **multilingual AAC tools**.

- Streamlining processes helps maintain quality despite pressure.

Alan's Response — Barrier #3

Lack of Robust Multilingual AAC Tools

Key Idea
Many AAC systems don't offer meaningful support for heritage languages.

Alan's Response — Barrier #3

- Multilingual users often lack access to tools in their home language.

- Language representation gaps limit real communication opportunities.

- Creating or customizing robust, inclusive systems is often a necessity.

- This work is essential, but time- and resource-intensive.

Alan's Takeaways

Invest in Systems That Include Everyone

- Stakeholder buy-in requires presence, participation, and perspective-shifting.

- Time is a limited resource—workflow design matters.

- Language access is a foundational equity issue in AAC—tools must reflect the diversity of users.

- Supporting multilingual AAC users means planning not just for communication, but for inclusion.

How AAC Practice Changes Over Time

Interview Question:

"Can you tell us a little bit about how your work with AAC users has changed over time?"

Maria's Evolving Practice
From Treatment to True Collaboration

Then:
Focused on delivering treatment step-by-step—goal-driven, structured, and prescriptive.

Now:
Approaches AAC as a flexible, collaborative process that centers the individual and their family.

- Sees value in adapting plans to real-life needs
- Prioritizes long-term impact, not just short-term progress
- Encourages early AAC adoption as a lifelong communication tool

Alan's Evolving Practice
From Simplified Tools to Scalable Support

Earlier Approach:

- Focused on simplicity and access
- Limited family involvement
- Therapy-centered mindset

Current Approach:

- Prioritizes **robust AAC systems** with thoughtful adaptation
- Engages families through **reusable resources** and **group trainings**
- Uses tech tools (e.g., Google Forms, link hubs) to gather input and streamline support

Vianca's Evolving Practice
From Tools to Ownership

Earlier Approach:

- Started with **low-tech AAC** due to limited resources
- Focused on basic access and vocabulary support

Current Approach:

- Moves toward **high-tech systems** with richer vocabulary and accessibility features
- Designs AAC with **user input**—from vocabulary to personalization (e.g., colors, stickers)
- Builds **self-advocacy skills** (e.g., "Please charge my device")
- Prioritizes user **independence and engagement** from an early age

Defining Culturally and Linguistically Affirming AAC

Interview Question:

"What does culturally and linguistically affirming AAC mean to you?"

Centering
the Family and the Child

Culturally and linguistically affirming AAC begins with centering the child and their family—not just clinically, but culturally.

- View the student's home language, routines, and identity as essential to intervention
- Make decisions with—not just about—the family
- Recognize that meaningful communication starts in familiar contexts

Maria

Adaptation Over Translation

Affirming AAC users means designing communication systems that **adapt** to their full linguistic world—not just translating content word-for-word.

- Draw from bilingual education: create tools that reflect how language is used, not just labeled
- Frame AAC content around meaning, not just vocabulary
- Avoid rigid frameworks that assume one dominant language structure

Maria

Affirmation is the Standard, Not an Add-On

Being culturally and linguistically affirming isn't advanced or optional—it's simply what good practice looks like.

- You don't have to speak a student's language to affirm it
- Practice openness, curiosity, and flexibility
- Commit to learning and unlearning as part of ongoing professional growth

Maria

Define Culture Broadly and Respectfully

Culturally affirming AAC begins with recognizing that **culture is multidimensional**—and always evolving.

- Consider language, ethnicity, ability, family values, religion, age, gender, and socioeconomic status in service delivery
- Understand that cultural identity changes over time—for both the client and the practitioner
- Practice **cultural humility** by reflecting on how your own identity shapes your work

Vianca

Build Trust Through Flexibility and Conversation

Cultural responsiveness isn't always fast—it often begins with **relationship-building** and reframing expectations.

- Expect initial hesitation or concern around AAC devices
- Frame AAC as **adding options**, not replacing speech
- Use exploratory language like *"What if we try this?"* to create space for curiosity and shared decision-making

Vianca

Use Language That Invites Possibility

The words we use shape what families believe is possible.

- Use open-ended prompts like *"What if they can?"* or *"I wonder what would happen if..."*
- Invite families to imagine success instead of fearing failure
- When values clash, language can help bridge perspectives without confrontation

Vianca

See the Whole Person, Not Just the Goals

Culturally and linguistically affirming AAC means recognizing the full identity of each student—not just their diagnosis or IEP.

- Honor students' heritage, stories, and lived experiences
- Consider how communication impacts life **beyond school**—at home, in community, and long term
- Adopt a **person-centered mindset** that values human connection, not just clinical progress

Alan

Zoom Out from the Classroom

Affirming practice requires expanding your focus beyond academic benchmarks.

- Design AAC supports with the **real world in mind**
- Ask: How will this support work at home? With extended family? In the community?
- Don't limit impact to therapy rooms—focus on **lifelong communication access**

Alan

Leverage Tools Without Letting Them Limit You

Affirming AAC isn't about making things harder—it's about using the right tools to do better work.

- Multilingual AAC may seem complex, but evolving tools are making it more accessible
- Stay open to learning new platforms and processes
- Let tools **enable inclusion**, not become a barrier to trying

Alan

Collaborating with Interpreters in AAC Practice

Interview Question:

"Have you had any experiences collaborating with interpreters when working with families or clients who speak a language you don't?"

Collaborating with Interpreters

- **Prep interpreters** with AAC terms and visuals in advance
- Use **custom folders and symbols** when full language systems aren't available
- Gently offer bilingual features, even when families say "English only"
- Ask collaborative questions (e.g., "How would you say it?") to build trust
- Always balance **cultural respect** with practical flexibility

Maria

Collaborating with Interpreters

- Partner with bilingual specialists to ensure appropriate **vocabulary** and **grammar**

- **Simplify language access** (e.g., single-button toggling) for motor accessibility

- Use interpreters and cultural brokers to support both language and cultural context

- Provide **clear**, translated materials for families

- Secure **dedicated** collaboration time through IEPs or district support

Vianca

Collaborating with Interpreters

- Recognize **setting-specific access**: interpreter support varies widely across clinical and school environments

- When possible, **involve interpreters beyond translation**—include them in sessions to build trust and connection

- **Prepare interpreters** with AAC context and expectations in advance

- Acknowledge that systemic barriers may limit access—and adapt while advocating where possible

Alan

A Vision for Culturally and Linguistically Affirming AAC

Interview Question:

"In a perfect world, what does culturally and linguistically affirming AAC look like for all of our clients, patients, and students?"

A Vision for Language Growth

- **Honor all languages** the client uses—not just English

- Center the **family's and individual's perspective** in planning and assessment

- Shift from "English acquisition" to **language development across systems**

- Build AAC supports that reflect and sustain the user's **full linguistic background**

Maria

A Vision of Seamless Multilingual Access

- **Time and collaboration** are built into practice—not squeezed in

- AAC users can **access all their languages easily**, without clunky toggling

- Systems support **code-switching as the norm**, not a workaround

- Devices offer rich, **centralized vocabulary** across languages to expand participation and expression

Vianca

A moment of connection—made possible through language, play, and presence.

Image generated using OpenAI's DALL·E, based on a prompt provided by APD Instructional Designer.

Using Tech Tools to Bridge Language Gaps

- Use tools like ChatGPT and Canva to translate and create content
- Helpful for emails, handouts, and written communication
- De-identify information to protect privacy
- New tools are emerging for real-time interpretation
- Tech can reduce barriers and make communication more accessible

Innovating with Purpose

- SLPs should partner with tech professionals to address real needs in AAC
- AI and voice technology show what's possible—language access can be next
- Progress depends on diverse voices in the field who understand communities
- Collaboration can drive culturally meaningful tools for AAC users

Go Beyond the Speech Room

Step into your community—listen, observe, and learn

Don't wait for change—initiate it

Think beyond traditional roles and tools

There's always more to discover, build, or advocate for

Tools for Bilingual AAC Practice

Looking for tools to support multilingual AAC users? Here's what to look for in a strong resource:

Languages that reflect your learners (e.g., Spanish, Korean)

Content that's accessible to both families and professionals

Culturally affirming frameworks, not just translated

Vocabulary built around meaningful overlap between languages (e.g., shared core words)

Integrated supports like books, lesson plans, and communication boards

Supporting Multilingual AAC Users: Step-by-Step

Identify the Client's Full Language Landscape

Step 1

- Languages they **speak**, **understand**, and **are exposed to**
- Across home, school, community, and future environments

Supporting Multilingual AAC Users: Step-by-Step

Incorporate Language Needs into Assessment

Step 2

- Document language exposure and plan AAC accordingly
- Consider **referrals**, **bilingual staff**, or **family involvement**
- Use **collaborative modeling** (e.g., SLP in English, parent in other language)

Supporting Multilingual AAC Users: Step-by-Step

Choose Appropriate Service Delivery Models

Step 3

Options include:
- 50/50 bilingual modeling (e.g., Urdu-English with family)
- One language during sessions, another at home
- Feature-matching to ensure toggling is accessible

Supporting Multilingual AAC Users: Step-by-Step

Use Low-Tech as a Foundation (and Backup)

Step 4

- Start with **low-tech** boards if high-tech programming isn't ready
- Customize with culturally relevant vocabulary
- Use as **backups** in settings where tech isn't feasible (e.g., pool, outdoors)
- Widely accepted and loved by **grandparents** and caregivers

Supporting Multilingual AAC Users: Step-by-Step

Build Family Capacity

Step 5

- Train families to **program devices** and model language use
- Transfer responsibility when appropriate to increase independence
- Offer **multiple ways** to engage: direct coaching, modeling, or resource sharing

Supporting Multilingual AAC Users: Step-by-Step

Reach Out When You Need Help

Step 6

- Tap into **colleagues, ASHA groups, Facebook communities**
- Stay open to asking, adapting, and learning collaboratively

There's Always Room for Low-Tech AAC

Why low-tech tools still matter:

- **Reliable backup** when devices break, lose power, or aren't allowed (e.g., pools, outdoor settings)

- **More accessible** to extended family like grandparents or caregivers unfamiliar with tech

- **Quicker to customize** when high-tech programming takes time

- **Versatile formats**: Core boards, wristbands, clipboards, floaties—even pillowcases!

Supporting Code-Switching

You don't need to speak both languages—just model access.

- Show how to **toggle between language folders**
- Use simple **bilingual examples** (e.g., "agua" and "water")
- Reinforce that **both languages are valid**
- Add **visual cues** (signs, labels) in the client's home languages

Make AAC Therapy Joyful, Not Just Functional

Avoid turning AAC into a quiz.
Instead of:
- ❌ "Say this."
- ❌ "Find that."

Try creating:
- **Real, motivating communication opportunities**
- Activities that invite **spontaneous expression**
- Sessions centered on **joy, play, and connection**