

Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) & Special Populations

A strong [Multi-tiered System of Supports](#) can include multilingual learners in meaningful ways to address their unique needs at all levels. This includes:

- **Team-driven shared leadership.** A team-based approach including classroom teachers, bilingual educators, EL specialists, reading specialists, and/or special education specialists may be helpful to determine what multilingual learners can do, what skills are still developing, and how to best support the student's academic, language and literacy development.
- **Data-based decision making.** Reviewing data not only from English language proficiency and academic assessments but also from observations and other data sources can help provide a complete picture of the multilingual learner and support decision-making about instructional needs.
- **Family, student, and community engagement.** Families and caregivers are critical partners in understanding multilingual learners' strengths and needs. Interpreters, bilingual educators, and community language brokers can also help families understand their essential role.
- **Evidence-based practices.** Multilingual learners need support with both their language and literacy skills as well as academic content. Literacy interventions alone cannot take the place of critical English language development (ELD) services provided by an educator with specialized training. Multilingual learners also need regular meaningful access to content that is taught using effective strategies for language learners.
- **Continuum of supports.** Multilingual learners should be included in Tier 1, 2 and 3 instruction and interventions to address their specific academic needs, in addition to having regular designated ELD services.

Services for MLs who also Qualify for Special Education Services

Multilingual Learners who also qualify for special education services have unique and specialized needs. At a minimum LEAs

- Ensure that English Language development is provided for all identified MLs who also qualify for Special Education
- Ensure that an educator(s) with the proper knowledge and skills regarding language acquisition participates on the Child Study, Referral and/or IEP team.
- Provide systems that support collaboration between EL Specialists, General Education Teachers, and Special Education Teachers.



- Recognize the common misunderstandings and work to dispel the myths and provide professional learning for all educators.

Culturally Responsive Practices for Identification of MLs with Disabilities

The process to refer and identify an ML for special education services requires a pre-referral, whole-child approach which considers multiple factors. Because multilingual learners come from a wide range of educational, familial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, educator should consider multiple factors including:

Personal and family characteristics

Educators should utilize a holistic approach which seeks to understand the child's life at home and at school. What is known about primary caregivers, family/household members, languages spoken at home and by whom? What are the cultures and traditions of this child's household and how are those reflected in/ honored by school systems so as to communicate the child can utilize all personal, cultural, and linguistic assets at school? What are the child's interests, hobbies, talents, and activities after school? When looking at multilingual English learners, these characteristics help educators understand and learn to discern the differences between language/cultural differences and true learning disability.

Psychological characteristics

The language acquisition process often includes a phase where students produce little English as they begin to develop the ability to process and comprehend the input from classroom instruction in English. The extent to which instruction is contextualized and involves extensive opportunities for oral language development opportunities can impact the extent of an individual student's silent phase. Personality characteristics, such as out-going, reserved, shy, etc. should also be considered as part of the pre-referral processes. It is helpful to observe the student in social and academic settings where English only is spoken as well as settings where the child's primary language is spoken in addition to one-to-one versus group settings as part of the information gathering process.

[Chapter 6 of the English Learner Toolkit](#) contains other examples of manifested learning behaviors and indicators of possible disability versus indicators of language difference due to the language acquisition process.

Previous schooling experiences

Students' prior schooling experiences impact their current performance in US systems. While many MLs may have been educated only in US schools, others may have experiences from multiple international systems. Some MLs may have experienced interrupted schooling or trauma from war, immigration and, most recently, the pandemic. All these factors must be considered when discerning language development from disability.

Learning environments and how they impact MLs

Systematic evaluation of the instructional environment is also a part of the process to distinguish disability-related behaviors versus language acquisition-related behaviors. This

evaluation includes the quality and amount of English language development services that have been provided and the extent to which those services are integral to/connected to core-content instruction. It also includes an evaluation of the complete school experience and the extent to which meaningful access to all content instruction is being provided.

To what extent are the assets/functions of the bilingual brain considered when planning instruction? To what extent does learning occur in meaningful, cohesive contexts as opposed to separate, disconnected settings? To what extent is the WIDA ELD Standards Framework utilized in planning instruction in core content classrooms? The likelihood of over referral is decreased if educators reflect upon the systems, structures, and instruction to determine to what extent they are providing adequate support and access to students acquiring English while being educated in English.

Cross-cultural considerations

Standardized tools for evaluating students often rely on comparisons to speakers of English. It is incumbent on the LEA to actively seek tools in the student's primary language as well as be mindful that interventions and instructional practices designed for speakers of English do not necessarily benefit MLs.

Oral language development in both the primary language and in English

Oral language is foundational to literacy and as such deserves robust and extensive focus. This should occur throughout the day and across content areas. Oral language is important in both the student's primary language and in English and is essential to develop student's literacy in either or both languages.

Literacy development in both the primary language and in English

It is important to look at the type of initial literacy instruction that was provided/is being provided. Learning to read in the primary language then transferring those skills to English is preferable. As seen in effective dual language programs, developing literacy in both languages results in stronger long-term outcomes for both MLs and speakers of English including students with special needs. Approaches to literacy development that are not designed or adapted for the unique needs of multilingual English learners do not benefit MLs and can have a detrimental impact on MLs ability read and comprehend academic English. It is vital that literacy instruction addresses oral language development, an emphasis on the similarities and differences between languages (cognates and false cognates) and be fully contextualized with visuals and realia.

The National Committee for Effective Literacy for Emergent Bilingual Students released a resource in February 2022 which outlines specifics of literacy instruction for MLs. [*Toward Comprehensive Effective Literacy Policy and Instruction for English Learner/Emergent Bilingual Students*](#)

Tiered Supports/Interventions Prior to Referral for Special Education Services

Tiered supports are provided to MLs in a manner similar to that provided speakers of English prior to any referral process for possible identification for special education. It is important that the tiered interventions/supports are designed or modified to address the unique needs of MLs as interventions designed for speakers of English without modifications are inadequate to address MLs needs.

Referral process

The English Learner Toolkit identifies four factors that may contribute to over identification or misidentification of MLs for Special Education services:

- Poor instructional practices
- Evaluating professional's lack of knowledge base regarding second language development versus disabilities
- Weak intervention strategies utilized prior to referral
- Inappropriate assessment tools (normed/designed for English-only speakers).

Misidentification/over identification is reduced when a collaborative multidisciplinary child student team with knowledge of second language acquisition, special education, English language development and the core curriculum engage in a supported process to gather and evaluate information as outlined above. Each member of the team has important perspective and expertise upon which the team draws to come to a shared decision regarding referral. This collaborative process helps to ensure due diligence in identifying true disability when considering referrals of students who are MLs for special education. Child study teams should document the evidence as well as the evaluative process as outlined above in which they engaged prior to making the referral.

Resources

National Committee for Effective Literacy for Emergent Bilingual Students: [*Toward Comprehensive Effective Literacy Policy and Instruction for English Learner/Emergent Bilingual Students*](#)

[OELA English Learner Toolkit](#)

[USDE Infogram on English Learners with Disabilities](#)

[Regional Educational Laboratory \(REL\) Infographic on Identifying English Learners with Disabilities](#)

OSPI webpage: [Disproportionality Self-Study Overview and Resources](#)

OSPI webpage: [Providing a Continuum of Support for English Learners](#)

For more information on creating an inclusive environment, see the [U.S. Department of Education's EL Toolkit Chapter 5](#), and for information on addressing the needs of English learners with disabilities, see [EL Toolkit Chapter 6](#).

What do Educators Need to Know about Early Literacy Screening of Multilingual Learners?

Students with reading difficulties should be identified as early as possible, but it is important to not confuse language development with a reading disability. Multilingual learners without learning disabilities may exhibit reading behaviors and characteristics that look like native English speakers who have reading disabilities. Some multilingual learners struggle with both language and reading, and students of any language can have dyslexia regardless of their linguistic background.

For this reason, **ALL eligible multilingual/English learners must be included in early literacy screening except during their first 4 months of U.S. schooling.** Multilingual learners' screening results should NOT be directly compared to grade-level norms. School teams should consider student progress and development of both language and literacy skills over time. **Students may be screened in a language other than English** if they have literacy skills in their home language or are enrolled in dual language programs.

Consider the following when using screeners in other languages:

- Screeners in other languages must be designed and normed for that language. Dialect variations must be considered. Use of an interpreter to provide sight translation of an English screener into another language is NOT appropriate and will not yield useful results.
- Screeners in other languages may not provide the whole picture for a multilingual learner. Most assessments have been normed for native speakers of that language, not children who are simultaneously developing two or more languages.
- If a student has skills in two or more languages, it is best to assess first in the student's dominant language by a multilingual educator and then assess in the second language to confirm and/or add new information about the student's skills.
- Consider the student's opportunity to learn in each language as well as previous and current exposure to literacy skills in each. Families and caregivers may provide useful information on students' language and literacy skills and use of their home language.

The following chart provides considerations for screening multilingual learners at various language levels based on their WIDA scores.

WIDA Overall Score Range (Screener or ACCESS Assessment)	Considerations for Screening
0-2.0	<p>Newcomers are exempt from screening for first 4 months.</p> <p>Students may screen in their home language (if possible).</p> <p>Grade-level norms will not be applicable in English.</p>
2.1-3.9	<p>Students should be screened (unless in their first 4 months).</p> <p>Students may screen in their home language (if needed).</p> <p>Grade-level norms may not be applicable in English. Look at progress over time.</p>
4.0-6.0	<p>Student should be screened.</p> <p>Students may screen in their home language (if useful).</p> <p>Grade-level norms may be applicable, but team should consider progress as well.</p>
Scores above a 4 in speaking and listening but lower in reading and writing may indicate warning signs and/or a need for intervention.	

When reviewing and interpreting results of multilingual learners' literacy screening, educators should consider the following:

1. **What strengths does the student bring?** Look at other content areas for strength-based skills. Use observations and other data points in addition to literacy screening data.
2. **What does the student know in each language?** Multilingual learners may still be simultaneously developing language and literacy skills in two or more languages.
3. **What can the student do when viewed across languages?** Assessment in a single language (either English or another language) may not fully capture all the student's skills. Reviewing skills across languages may help show what the student "can do."

How are Screening Data Used to Support Multilingual Learners?

The following questions may be useful when reviewing and interpreting the literacy screening results of multilingual learners. Data review teams may include classroom teachers, bilingual educators, EL specialists, reading specialists, and/or special education teachers. The use of home languages may be more applicable to dual language programs and is not always possible in programs with multiple languages.

Skill	Questions to Consider
Phonological Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Does the student's home language break down words or sounds in this way? (syllables vs. individual phonemes)• Is the skill typical in the student's home language? (i.e. rhyming, alliteration, etc.)• If assessing in another language, is the task typical for that language?
Phonemic Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Has the student acquired these phonemes in their spoken English?• If assessing in another language, is isolating sounds/phonemes a typical linguistic practice?• What sounds does the student know in each language (if testing in multiple languages)? Is there overlap?• Are there sounds in English that are "tricky" for speakers of the student's home language (if known)?
Letter-Sound Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What letters does the student know in each language (if testing in both)? Is there overlap?• Are there letters that are "tricky" in English for speakers of the student's home language (if known)?
Rapid Automatized Naming Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can the student name objects in either language? (How many can they name altogether across languages?)• Is the student using a "non-standard" term that still means something similar?• How does the student's speed correspond to their language development?

To build upon students' existing skills in one language as they develop another, school teams should use the [WIDA Can-Do Philosophy](#).

While students of any language background may have weaknesses associated with dyslexia, multilingual learners are also overidentified for special education services in Washington state for specific learning disabilities. Because of this, referring multilingual learners for evaluation must be done with great caution. Many districts use a critical data process to consider multiple factors including the student's first language development and background before considering a referral for testing. [Separating Difference from Disability](#) and [The ELL Critical Data Process](#) may be helpful in developing appropriate pre-referral processes for multilingual learners.

How Should We Support Early Literacy Instruction and Intervention for Multilingual Learners?

All students, including multilingual learners, benefit from instruction that is essential for students with language-based learning disorders, including:

- Integrating content, language, and literacy instruction.
- Strengthening oral language development.
- Teaching writing in connection with reading as an essential skill.
- Building on student's home languages and cultures.
- Focusing on comprehension to support academic literacy and student success.

Within the [MTSS framework](#), multilingual learners should be uniquely considered when determining intervention groupings for each tier of instruction and intervention. These considerations include:

- Tier 1 instruction that integrates content, language, and literacy and builds on students' home languages and cultures.
- Regular designated English language development (ELD) provided by or in collaboration with a specially trained educator.
- Explicit focus on oral language development and comprehension in addition to phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary.
- Intervention materials that are specially designed or adapted to ensure words/text are connected to meaning using visuals, context, or other means.
- Interventions provided in the student's home language in dual language programs or if available. Stronger first language literacy is associated with stronger literacy in English.

See mtss4els.org for more ideas on addressing the literacy needs of multilingual learners through MTSS.

Resources:

Collier, C. (2011). Seven steps to separating difference from disability. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Escamilla, K., Olsen, L., and Slavick, J. (2022). Toward comprehensive effective literacy policy and instruction for English learner/emergent bilingual students. Retrieved from: <https://multilingualliteracy.org/>

Gaab, N. (2017, February). It's a myth that young children cannot be screened for dyslexia! International Dyslexia Association. Retrieved from: <https://dyslexiaida.org/its-a-myth-that-young-children-cannot-be-screened-for-dyslexia/>

Sandman-Hurley, K. (2020). Dyslexia and the English learner dilemma. Language Magazine, Retrieved from: <https://www.languagemagazine.com/dyslexia-and-the-english-learner-dilemma/>