BRIDGING THE GAP

Supporting the reading development of multilingual students with learning differences

By **Julie Esparza Brown** & **Sylvia Linan-Thompson**

*r*eading is a precursor to students' overall academic achievement and is essential to post-school success, yet longstanding gaps highlight differences in reading outcomes between English-only (EO) students and English learners, identified here as multilingual learners (MLs). The latest data from the National Association of Educational Progress in the United States show MLs performing 32 points below EO peers in fourth grade and 39 points below EO peers in eighth grade when assessed in English. Data for students learning to read in their home language (L1) is not available. Given these gaps, it is essential that reading instruction be tailored to the unique backgrounds of MLs.

Here we provide guidance on using evidence-based practices for MLs and multilingual learners with learning disabilities (MLwLD). We consider both EO instruction (the predominant instructional model for MLs) and dual language instruction. Regardless of the language used for reading instruction, the linguistic, cultural, and experiential assets and identities of students must be honored and leveraged. This ensures that MLs' reading instruction emphasizes meaning and connections while teaching reading skills.

RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

■ Brown, J.E., Sanford, A.K., & Sacco, D. (2023). *Multi-tiered system of supports for multilingual learners: Using culturally and linguistically aligned practices*. National Center on Intensive Intervention. intensiveintervention.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/mtss-culturally-responsive.pdf

■ Linan-Thompson, S., & Vaughn, S. (2007). *Research-based methods of reading instruction for English language learners, grades K–4*. ASCD.

■ Project Lee, projectlee.org

■ Sanford, A., Brown, J.E., & Turner, M. (2012). Enhancing instruction for English learners in RTI systems: The PLUSS model. *Multiple Voices for Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners, 13*(1), 56–79.

Instructional considerations

Multilingual learners are in the process of learning to speak a new language and often are learning in at least two languages. Their early print reading experiences can vary based on their home experiences and their opportunities to develop their L1 and English (L2). Once in school, the instructional model they are provided with is also a factor. Generally, although learning to read in the L1 is ideal, the majority, including MLwLD, learn only in their second language (L2).

Instruction for MLs and MLwLD must incorporate evidence-based reading instruction, effective teaching strategies for students with disabilities, and—when MLs are learning in their L2—methods for acquiring that new language. The most effective approach integrates these practices cohesively rather than teaching them separately.

Reading instruction

The skills for learning to read and breaking the code are acquired once. After developing these skills, they can be applied when learning to read additional languages. In other words, many reading skills do not need to be retaught in each new language. The order and importance of these foundational skills, however, depends on the language's orthographic depth (how directly letters map to sounds). For more transparent languages, such as Spanish, certain phonemic and phonological awareness abilities, like onset-rhyme awareness, are not prerequisites for learning to read. But for opaque orthographies, such as English, a range of phonological and phonemic awareness skills typically precede reading acquisition.

Strong evidence shows phonological awareness abilities in a first language positively transfer to a second language. Reading instruction should explicitly link skills by starting with positive transfer (commonalities across languages) and partial transfer (similarities) to leverage this cross-linguistic transfer. Elements that fall under the categories of neutral transfer (skills unique to one language) and negative transfer (mimicking the other language inaccurately, such as false cognates) should be taught explicitly to avoid confusion and overgeneralization. (See the sidebar for more information.)

In the U.S., Spanish is influenced by English and vice versa, thus students in bilingual contexts develop their languages differently than students living in a Spanish-speaking country. Consequently, reading development for ML students in the U.S. is different from reading instruction for students learning to read only in Spanish. This is a critical consideration for educators planning meaningful instruction that fosters biliteracy.

Beyond teaching targeted skills, instruction and interventions must be culturally sustaining and must build on students' knowledge and cultural wealth. Consequently, reading instruction for all MLs needs to bridge evidence-based reading practices with best practices for MLs. Key instructional considerations for students learning in their L1 or L2 are described next.

Strong evidence shows phonological awareness abilities in a first language positively transfer to a second language.

Oral language

Early language learning requires exposure to the different components of language: phonology (sounds), vocabulary, language structures (grammar), and prosody (intonation/rhythm). All learners develop these in their L1. When MLs learn to read in a language they are still learning to speak, however, they need appropriate language support. Otherwise, skills needed for higher level comprehension, such as making inferences and understanding cause and effect, will be constrained.

Vocabulary knowledge and morphosyntactic skills (knowledge of how to construct words properly and put them together into grammatically correct sentences) were found to be especially strong predictors not only of word reading ability but also reading comprehension proficiency. Interwoven with word recognition skills, language comprehension is essential for reading fluency. This underscores the need to directly teach both vocabulary/decoding and language structures in the instructional language. The aim is for MLs to leverage first language knowledge while integrating new second language skills.

Teachers must understand their multilingual students' language development across both languages and contexts, as well as their backgrounds. Later reading difficulties for MLs often arise more from linguistic comprehension challenges than decoding issues. Therefore, reading instruction must incorporate vocabulary and oral language development from the start. There are multiple ways to build oral language proficiency. Read-alouds, classroom discussions, and Readers Theatre provide students with the opportunity to use language and expand their vocabulary.

Phonemic awareness

Both the National Reading Panel and the National Literacy Panel for Language Minority Children in the U.S. highlight phonemic awareness (PA) as an essential first component for learning to read. A subcategory of phonological awareness, PA is the ability to hear and manipulate the individual sounds in spoken words. This foundational skill is necessary for reading in any alphabetic writing system, though the importance varies somewhat based on the language's orthographic depth (how directly letters map to sounds). Research also suggests MLs can transfer PA skills across languages.

Students who have difficulty developing PA skills in their L1, however, will likely need additional support transferring those skills when learning in their L2. To explicitly teach these skills, focus on segmenting and blending individual phonemes (sounds). Use visuals and manipulatives such as Elkonin boxes and provide ample practice opportunities. When teaching PA to MLs, it is also critical to build their overall language proficiency to support literacy

Transfer Defined

Transfer Rating	Definition	Examples (Spanish-English)
Positive Transfer	Knowledge of one language provides a helpful boost in learning another language, aiding in the acquisition of biliteracy. Occurs when concepts/patterns/elements are the same/very similar in two languages.	**Cognates:** Words share common Latin roots (e.g., *familia*/family)
Partial Transfer	Knowledge of one language (concepts/elements/patterns) can at times facilitate the learning of a new language, but other aspects may interfere with the acquisition process.	**Punctuation:** Some punctuation marks are the same while other are different (¡!, ¿?) **False Cognates:** When words are the same/similar across languages but have different meanings (rope/*ropa*; rope means a strong cord, *ropa* means clothing).
Neutral Transfer	No positive or negative transfer occurs when a concept/element/pattern is unique to one language and has no direct equivalent in the other language.	**Grammar:** English has the gerund form (e.g., the "-ing" form of a verb when it functions as a noun such as "I am studying"); Spanish does not. To teach this concept to Spanish speakers learning English, teachers may provide explanations or analogies using Spanish grammatical structures to help learners grasp the idea of the gerund.
Negative Transfer	When knowledge (concepts/elements/patterns) of one language hinders or interferes with learning in other languages.	**Grammar:** Word order differences across languages (e.g., placement of adjectives, English: "the blue book"; Spanish: "*el libro azul*")

Pluss Defined

PLUSS Component	Definition
Pre-teach critical vocabulary and prime background knowledge, and make cultural connections.	Identify and pre-teach vocabulary and background knowledge critical to understanding content and making connections to prior learning, experiences, and student culture. Teach word learning strategies to support understanding and learning words in context.
Language modeling, instruction, and opportunities for practice	Provide language instruction (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics) at the word and sentence level to understand content. Model appropriate use of academic language. Provide structured opportunities for students to practice using language in meaningful contexts.
Use visuals and graphic organizers.	Use pictures, graphic organizers, gestures, real objects, and other visual prompts to make critical language, concepts, and strategies more comprehensible to learners.
Systematic and explicit instruction	**Systematic instruction:** This involves teaching in sequential, manageable steps that progress from simple to more complex concepts and skills over time, teaching pre-skills before introducing more advanced concepts, and fading support as skills are developed and generalized. **Explicit instruction:** Overtly teach each step through teacher modeling and examples including the following steps: Explain, model, and provide guided practice with monitoring, feedback, and opportunities for independent practice in content and concepts (I do, we do, you do).
Strategic use of native language, culture, and teaching for transfer	Identify concepts and content students already know in their native language and culture to explicitly explain, define, and bridge to new language and concepts in English. Use translanguaging strategies.

acquisition. Know the sound systems of your students' home languages to guide instruction and anticipate challenges with discerning non-native sounds. Endeavor to use words that are part of the students' receptive vocabularies. When introducing a new sound, explicitly point out the sounds that are the same in both languages and emphasize the sounds unique to the new language. After a PA lesson, define unfamiliar words using visuals or gestures to help build vocabulary before reading those words.

Phonics

During phonics instruction, students learn the written symbols (letters) for the sounds they learned in their PA instruction. As with PA instruction, phonics instruction for MLs must be contextualized in a comprehensible way. Studies that provided instruction in L1 or L2 found that emphasizing comprehensive and systematic phonics instruction facilitates word reading for MLs. Phonics instruction for MLs should: (1) follow a defined sequence; (2) explicitly teach letter-sound relationships; (3) teach patterns across letter combinations; (4)

explicitly teach vocabulary; and (5) use decodable texts with familiar (or taught) content.

Phonic skills develop more quickly in transparent languages. However, students who have learning difficulties need instruction that supports the development of decoding skills. Ensure MLwLD have developed knowledge of the letter-sound correspondence of letters used in words and the use of continuous blending of words; have practice reading the words in isolation and in text; and can fast-map (quickly define) unknown words. MLs benefit from explicit, systematic phonics instruction regardless of their English oral proficiency levels.

Fluency

Reading fluency is the ability to read quickly, accurately, and with expression. It bridges the gap between word recognition and comprehension. In any language, the ability to read fluently, or with automaticity, is necessary for understanding what is read. In Spanish, a student's reading rate is a strong predictor of their comprehension, whereas in English, reading accuracy is

more predictive. Beyond just decoding accurately and at a good rate, however, students also need to know the meaning of the words they are reading. Therefore, for MLs, fluency instruction must be coupled with vocabulary, syntax, listening comprehension, and language development to build their comprehension skills.

For MLs, their fluency rate in a second language may initially lag as they internally translate between languages to aid comprehension until they develop familiarity with English language structures and vocabulary. MLs with language-based disabilities may also lack automaticity in decoding or vocabulary knowledge. These students benefit from Language Focused Repeated Reading. This approach includes explicit instruction of vocabulary prior to reading, discussions to build background knowledge, and repeated reading of text. When students encounter unknown words during choral reading, they raise their index finger, and the teacher will quickly define or fast-map the word to support comprehension without disrupting the reading flow.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary knowledge is essential for reading comprehension, yet it is the component that MLs require the most long-term support in developing. While students learn informal or conversational language in a new language, the deeper academic vocabulary and language structures develop gradually and require explicit instruction.

Seminal research found that students must know around 95% of the words in a text for moderate comprehension. By middle school, students need a vocabulary bank of approximately 25,000 words to understand grade-level texts. Consequently, for MLs learning in either or both L1 and L2, explicit vocabulary instruction should be integrated into all reading instruction through: (1) rich and varied language experiences; (2) explicit instruction of individual words; (3) word learning strategies; and (4) word consciousness, or the awareness of and interest in words and their meanings.

Teaching connecting or transition words helps readers understand logical relationships within texts, which become increasingly common in texts by late elementary grades. Sentence combining can be taught through roleplays and physical response to help support acquisition. Using picture cards, paraphrasing, teaching synonyms, and providing multiple examples across both languages are engaging strategies for teaching both transition and content vocabulary words. Additionally, teaching common word parts and cognates (words similar across languages) in both L1 and L2 supports vocabulary development.

Ultimately, the capacity for L1 acquisition is inherent in the neurological makeup of everyone, and that potential develops through interaction with others in their community. We must nurture and build upon those L1 strengths when teaching a new language.

Comprehension

The key difference in reading abilities between native English speakers and MLs is moderated by language comprehension skills. Over the years, several meta-analyses and literature reviews have built a robust evidence base around effective comprehension practices for students with and without learning disabilities. Explicit teacher modeling and student use of strategies that support activating prior knowledge, monitoring comprehension, questioning, clarifying, visualizing, predicting, and summarizing in the context of reading comprehension and content area literacy builds skills for both monolingual and MLs.

For MLs, effective reading comprehension instruction should emphasize: (a) using cognitive strategies such as self-monitoring and self-questioning; (b) teaching narrative and expository text structure; and (c) recognizing the language features and conventions within each content area. Finally, students should see themselves represented in the texts they read and explore experiences that align with their cultural backgrounds. When students can make cultural connections to text, it facilitates their comprehension.

In summary, MLs and MLwLD particularly benefit from direct and explicit instruction in using comprehension strategies flexibly, understanding various text structures, and reading culturally relevant materials as they develop their language comprehension abilities.

A promising approach: The PLUSS framework

Designed to merge systematic and explicit teaching methods with research-based instruction for MLs, the PLUSS framework represents a promising instructional approach. The framework merges the science of reading alongside evidence-based instruction for MLs. Although an in-depth examination of PLUSS exceeds our scope here, readers are encouraged to explore this framework further. The PLUSS model guides educators in enhancing their instructional routines and curricula to build instructional bridges benefiting ML students.

Before reading or content instruction, teachers can use the PLUSS framework (defined in the chart on the previous page). as an overlay to lessons fostering the critical integration of robust language and literacy skills, while simultaneously building on existing content knowledge and introducing new concepts— ultimately culminating in appropriate instruction for MLs and MLwLD.

The right to read

All students have the right to learn to read through high-quality, evidence-based instruction, which provides a roadmap for teaching every student, including MLs and MLwLD. The practices included here address linguistic, cultural, and instructional needs of students. To be truly effective, however, these practices should be integrated cohesively as part of a comprehensive reading block. A robust reading block not only includes the foundational skills required for learning to read but also exposes children to relevant literature that sparks their interest, expands their perspectives, and helps them understand that reading can be a tool for both learning and enjoyment. ■
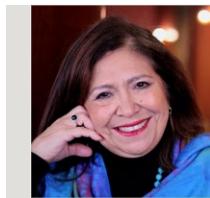
Julie Esparza Brown (jebrown@pdx.edu) is a professor in the Department of Special Education at Portland State University in Oregon.

Sylvia Linan-Thompson (sthomps5@uoregon.edu) is an associate professor at the University of Oregon in the Department of Special Education and Clinical Sciences.