Early Literacy for Multilingual Learners

CROSS-CUTTING IDEAS: DEFINITIONS, EXAMPLES, AND MYTHS

Early Literacy for Multilingual Learners: Cross-cutting Ideas

1 ASSET ORIENTATION

A. English literacy instruction must build upon multilingual learners' existing linguistic and literacy assets.

B. Literacy instruction needs to take place in environments that foreground the strengths and potential of multilingual learners. Literacy instruction should be asset and strengths-based in response to students' language and literacy development needs.

2 MEANINGFUL OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN

A. Literacy is first and foremost a meaning-making endeavor. Literacy instruction for multilingual learners should be grounded in meaningful contexts.

B. Multilingual learners need abundant opportunities to engage in discourse and oral language development activities for learning, communication, and literacy development.

C. Multilingual learners need additional opportunities to learn the components of literacy through exposure and practice.

3 INTERDEPENDENCE OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY

A. Multilingual learners need to develop language proficiency in order to read and write successfully. Language is a key component in reading and writing.

B. Code-based and meaning-based literacy skills are interdependent.

CROSS-CUTTING IDEAS: DEFINITIONS, EXAMPLES, AND MYTHS

Cross Cutting Idea	Summary	Example	Myths
1A English literacy instruction must build upon multilingual learners' existing linguistic and literacy assets.	Multilingual learners come to school with language and literacy skills in their home language and have the right to bring all of their linguistic resources into the classroom as they engage in reading, writing, and learning. English literacy instruction should utilize a child's existing linguistic and literacy knowledge as resources and assets. Teachers should acknowledge and build on the sounds, words, and language children already know in their home language. Literacy development in a new language is highly influenced by the linguistic features of a child's first language and an individual child's literacy assets and skills in that language.	Using manipulatives, visualizing, and naming conventions to elicit and build on what children already know Home Language Development Strategies (Early Edge)	Students have "no language" or that children do not have existing linguistic and literacy assets
1B Literacy instruction needs to take place in environments that foreground the strengths and potential of multilingual learners. Literacy instruction should be asset and strengths-based in response to students' language and literacy development needs.	Instructional materials and literacy instruction should ensure that multilingual learners fully participate in literacy instruction as readers and writers regardless of their level of English proficiency. Effective literacy instruction for multilingual learners provides opportunities for them to engage and express ideas, and help children develop confidence and identities as readers and writers in English and in their home language. Literacy instruction should draw from community and home literacy practices including what children are familiar with in their communities (ex: road signs, packages, grocery store items), connect with their families' literacy practices, and reinforce positive messages regarding literacy at home in the home language.	Student interviews or "About Me" bags that provide students to share who they are, their interests, and their experiences at home The Importance of Home Language Series Teaching About Immigration in Elementary Schools	Children cannot engage in literacy activities if they are not yet able to decode in English. Multilingual students will always be "behind" in reading. We can understand a child's level of literacy using only English-based assessments.
2A Literacy is first and foremost a meaning-making endeavor. Literacy instruction for multilingual learners should be grounded in meaningful contexts.	Literacy instruction should always occur in meaningful contexts. "Meaningful contexts" means that students have the opportunity to practice skills in the context of connected texts about worthwhile content for particular purposes and audiences. Foundational literacy instruction, such as phonological awareness and phonics, should be systematic, explicit, and contextualized for multilingual learners. Literacy skills should not be taught in isolation, which can cause students to lose sight of the connection between the skills and how they will help students understand and convey meaningful ideas.	Shared research project Child-initiated Centers How types of play, concrete representations, and daily routines develop literacy in meaningful contexts.	Literacy skills can be learned in isolation (rather than through text connections). Word calling and fluent decoding means multilingual learners know how to read.

2B Multilingual learners need abundant opportunities to engage in discourse and oral language development activities for learning, communication, and literacy development.	Multilingual learners need explicit instruction in English <u>oral language development</u> in order to learn to read and write. Effective oral language instruction for multilingual learners includes teaching vocabulary, listening comprehension, syntactic complexity, metalinguistic knowledge, and content knowledge. As children are learning various linguistic features and forms in the texts they are reading, they need opportunities to develop their oral language to connect verbal and written expression.	[Oral Language Development Strategies (Early Edge)](#) [Shared research project](#) [Child-initiated Centers](#)	Oral language is separate from other language/literacy work.
2C Multilingual learners need additional opportunities to learn the components of literacy through exposure and practice.	Multilingual learners may require additional opportunities to learn through extra instructional time, practice, and additional exposures to specific skills and components of literacy. Individual children's learning trajectories can differ, but overall, literacy instruction for multilingual learners should consider frequency, dosage, and further reinforcement of skills both in the literacy block and in ESL periods so that children make progress on all components of literacy over time.	Repeated Reading Extension activities to develop language in association with literacy objective [Language functions and graphic organizers](#)	The same literacy block instruction for all students is adequate for multilingual learners.
3A Multilingual learners need to develop language proficiency in order to read and write successfully. Language is a key component in reading and writing.	The role of language is critical in comprehension and as a part of reading as a meaning-making activity. Language includes oral language as well as knowledge of syntax at the sentence level and genre knowledge (e.g., how we read narratives versus how we read math problems). The explicit teaching of how language works in texts is critical to access meanings in text. For these reasons, all students, but specifically multilingual learners, need explicit instruction that develops linguistic knowledge in the context of reading and writing.	[Early Childhood ELD Strategies (Early Edge)](#) [Language functions and graphic organizers](#)	Higher doses of phonics instruction is more effective than quality ESL for multilingual learners.
3B Code-based and meaning-based literacy skills are interdependent.	Multilingual learners benefit from a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction that supports *simultaneous* and *interdependent* development of code-based and meaning-based skills in the context of a knowledge-building curriculum. Skilled reading in a new language requires both code-based skills (e.g., concepts of print, phonological awareness, and phonics) and meaning-based skills (e.g., oral language, comprehension, knowledge). Effective literacy instructional approaches for multilingual learners treat code-based and meaning-based skills as interdependent, interconnected, and inseparable.	Follow up a fluency activity with close reading of 1 key sentence to focus on the meaning or direct instruction in 2 key target words that build comprehension of the text overall.	Phonics instruction does not involve the meanings of words. Multilingual learners need code-based skills as a pre-requisite for meaning-based work with texts.

1 ASSET ORIENTATION

A. English literacy instruction must build upon multilingual learners' existing linguistic and literacy assets.

Multilingual learners come to school with language and literacy skills in their home language and have the right to bring all of their linguistic resources into the classroom as they engage in reading, writing, and learning. Understanding these specific assets and strengths is critical to culturally and linguistically responsive English literacy development. Literacy curriculum and instruction must take into account the various ways in which reading and writing development differs for students whose primary language is not English. When engaging with reading and writing in any language, multilingual children naturally draw upon their home language resources and experiences (García & Kleifgen, 2020). English literacy instruction should utilize a child's existing linguistic and literacy knowledge as resources and assets.

For children who can read in their home language, this involves supporting cross-linguistic connections and comparisons between English and home language. Teachers should acknowledge and build on the sounds, words, and language children already know in their home language. Children may also know ways of interacting with texts that come from their home language and community. Literacy development in a new language is highly influenced by the linguistic features of a child's first language and an individual child's literacy assets and skills in that language (Melby Lervåg and Lervåg, 2011). If these differ from English, children should develop understanding of these differences and integrate new language and literacy skills in English into their repertoire (Laija-Rodríguez et al, 2006).

Educational settings should intentionally support the development of home language literacy and English literacy concurrently with biliteracy as the end goal. Literacy programs, curriculum materials, and instruction should strive for biliteracy in alignment with research findings for young multilingual learners. (NASEM, 2017; Goldenberg & Cárdenas-Hagan, 2023) When that is not yet possible, English literacy instruction should include equal recognition, celebration, and the promoting of learning to read and write in the home language alongside learning to read in English. The languages and cultures of multilingual learners are not challenges to overcome; rather, they form an integral part of the identities and communities that culturally and linguistically sustaining curricular materials and instruction should affirm (Paris, 2012).

B. Literacy instruction needs to take place in environments that foreground the strengths and potential of multilingual learners. Literacy instruction should be asset and strengths–based in response to students' language and literacy development needs.

Multilingual learners do not need to reach a threshold of English language proficiency or meet certain prerequisite skills before they can participate in literacy instruction and activities. By positioning multilingual learners as thinkers and doers who use and interact with language and texts to construct meaning, and with the right entry points, all multilingual learners, even those who are new to learning to read and write in English, can engage in specific parts of texts based on their zone of proximal development. Instructional materials and literacy instruction should ensure that multilingual learners fully participate in literacy instruction as readers and writers regardless of English proficiency to engage and express ideas, and help children develop confidence and identities as readers and writers in English and in their home language.

Literacy instruction should draw from community and home literacy practices including what children are

familiar with in their communities (road signs, packages, grocery store items), connect with their families' literacy practices, and reinforce positive messages regarding literacy at home in the home language. Teachers can use relevant home language media, materials, music, and games to create an inclusive learning environment from which children develop language and literacy skills. Eliciting family literacy practices and connecting school literacy activities to home activities helps bridge children's experiences between home and school.

Literacy instruction should also take place in a multilingual learning environment (Espinosa & Ascenzi-Moreno, (2021), where the physical space includes home language or bilingual books and labels in the classroom and artifacts and realia that connect to children's homes, families, and community. School activities can include multilingual activities such as home language book clubs or storytelling time in home language groups.

2 MEANINGFUL OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN

A. Literacy is first and foremost a meaning–making endeavor. Literacy instruction for multilingual learners should be grounded in meaningful contexts.

Literacy is a tool that enables students to learn about the world and express their own ideas. Students do not study reading and writing for their own sake, but rather to build the skills necessary to build knowledge, and to engage with and share meaningful ideas. To that end, literacy instruction should always occur in meaningful contexts. "Meaningful contexts" means that students have the opportunity to practice skills in the context of connected texts about worthwhile content for particular purposes and audiences.

Foundational literacy instruction, such as phonological awareness and phonics, should be systematic, explicit (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), and contextualized for multilingual learners (Beck & Beck, 2013; Mesmer, 2019). In this approach, literacy skills are not taught in isolation, which can cause students to lose sight of the connection between the skills and how they will help students understand and convey meaningful ideas (Beck & Beck, 2013). Rather, the approach rests on the interdependence among oral language, literacy, content, and knowledge (Brisk, 2022; Gebhard, 2019; Goldenberg, 2020). For example, when teaching phonological awareness, teachers help students identify what words mean while also teaching their sounds. Similarly, for phonics instruction, multilingual learners need support to understand what words mean in English; practicing letter-sound correspondence for unfamiliar words has limited value.

In pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, an intentional language-focused pedagogy of play supports literacy (Escamilla et al., 2022), involving children's play and teacher-facilitated play that provide a meaning-making context for children to developing skills, oral language, and understandings (Baker, 2019). Teachers can facilitate through play the connection and meanings of new concepts, children can practice using language in a low-risk environment, and teachers can observe children's thinking and language use during play (Baker, 2019; Tabors, 2008). Guided play can create meaningful language experiences tied to concrete objects and realia that support content-specific language development (Moses & Torrejon Capurro, 2023).

B. Multilingual learners need abundant opportunities to engage in discourse and oral language development activities for learning, communication, and literacy development.

Oral language development is a necessary component of learning content, building knowledge, and literacy development for multilingual learners. Student talk and teacher discourse moves that promote thinking and foster extended student discussion contribute to content and literacy learning and foster opportunities for oral language development. Oral language is also the bedrock of print literacy (Roskos et al., 2003). Oral language powerfully contributes to reading comprehension (Huang et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2006; Prevoo et al., 2016) because readers need to recognize the words they read and immediately link them to the ideas they represent in order to make meaning of a text. Otherwise, they are word-calling without comprehension.

Thus, multilingual learners need explicit instruction in English oral language development in order to learn to read and write (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2010). Effective oral language instruction for multilingual learners includes teaching vocabulary, listening comprehension, syntactic complexity, metalinguistic knowledge, and content knowledge (Escamilla et al., 2013; Lesaux & Geva, 2006). As children are learning various linguistic features and forms in the texts they are reading, they need opportunities to develop their oral language to

connect verbal and written expression. Multilingual learners need to be able to say and hear the sentences within a text, to hear and say and know the meaning of the words with the text, and be able to hear, understand, and read aloud the texts they are reading or writing. Multilingual learners need targeted explicit oral language instruction that supports the complexity and demands of the texts they are asked to read. Developing listening comprehension of complex language through read alouds, interactions with texts, and text based conversations is critical for multilingual learners to make sense of the complex language they read and write in texts.

In order to develop oral language, young multilingual learners need many structured opportunities to negotiate meaning through talk as they engage in academic tasks in order to develop their literacy skills (Echevarria et al., 2016). Literacy is not a solitary task without interaction (Perry, 2012). Opportunities for talk help students participate in the active reasoning and processing needed to practice and develop their literacy skills, from foundational skills to negotiating meaning in comprehending and composing texts. For example, students in kindergarten can engage in evidence-based argumentation verbally, building an oral foundation on which they can develop reading and writing. Peer-assisted learning provides effective and motivating opportunities for multilingual students to practice and extend literacy through oral language (National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine, 2017). Peer-mediated literacy experiences support print-based skills like phonemic awareness and phonics (McMaster et al., 2008) and meaning-based skills like comprehension (Goldenberg, 1992). For young multilingual learners, emergent literacy practices and peer interaction overlap in ways that foster oral language development (Bernstein, 2017).

Teachers' discursive moves (what teachers say) also play an important role in fostering and extending students' opportunities to talk. Traditionally, teachers ask questions and evaluate students' responses, but teachers can ask open-ended questions, encourage students to respond to each other, and invite students to elaborate and extend their responses (Cazden, 1988). Discursive moves like these can offer scaffolding for multilingual learners that promotes thinking by raising the expectation for their verbal contributions (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). Interactional scaffolding, or the ways teachers interact with multilingual students in the moment to extend and foster literacy and content learning, offers important support for students' developing oral language (de Oliveira et al., 2023).

Oral language development also has its own inherent value. (It is not just valuable because it contributes to print literacy.) Through speaking and listening, students communicate and participate in community. Oracy involves the ability to express and extend their academic learning through increasingly complex linguistic registers (Escamilla et al., 2013).

For young multilingual learners in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, carefully crafted play environments, with props and tools linked to recent content-area learning, create opportunities for children to practice recently-learned vocabulary and language patterns (Moses & Torrejon Capurro, 2023) and support oral language and literacy development (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). Play provides opportunities for children to experiment and practice with language in a low-risk environment, and it provides an additional context for valuable peer interactions.

The development of oral language should be the primary focus of ESL instruction in connection to core content learning (Goldenberg, 2013). Oral language should also be a central component of the tier 1 literacy block where multilingual learners have extended opportunities through small-group instruction and peer conversations to develop oral language.

Instructional Practices:

- Incorporate speaking and listening instruction and practice into all content-area instruction, not just the literacy block.
- Provide opportunities for oral practice of all newly-taught literacy skills.

- Create many opportunities for peer-to-peer interactions to discuss, practice, and reinforce content and knowledge building. For example,
  - Provide opportunities to use vocabulary words in relation to texts, content, and their own lives in classroom discussion.
  - Invite children to listen, discuss, and dissect speeches, stories, podcasts, and texts to foster listening comprehension.
- Facilitate small-group and whole-class discussions that require and support students to participate in extended discourse, developing and tracking ideas across multiple turns of talk.
- Use supportive teacher discourse moves (such as asking students to explain their thinking) to foster extended oral contributions.
- Create play environments that provide children opportunities to talk about recently-learned content in a low-risk context that involves peer interactions.
- Use whole-group and small-group conversations that build reading comprehension and connect oral language development to their reading and comprehension of texts.
- Discuss how language works, including engaging in cross-linguistic analysis (comparing home language and English), to develop metalinguistic awareness.
- Anchor oral language development activities using visuals or wordless books
- Engage students in verbal storytelling before asking children to write

C. Multilingual learners need additional opportunities to learn the components of literacy through exposure and practice.

Learning a new language, and developing literacy in that language, is challenging and takes time (Hakuta et al., 2000; Demie, 2012). Multilingual learners may require additional opportunities to learn through extra instructional time, practice, and additional exposures to specific skills and components of literacy. Individual children's learning trajectories can differ, but overall, literacy instruction for multilingual learners should consider frequency, dosage, and further reinforcement of skills both in the literacy block and in ESL periods so that children make progress on all components of literacy over time.

For example, teachers may need to circle back to specific phonemes and graphemes, revisiting particular sounds in different words using varied multisensory and multimodal methods to reinforce specific skills in additional ways because multilingual children are newly orienting to English orthography and its sound system. Multilingual learners need additional exposure to new sounds that do not exist in their home language, and opportunities to compare and contrast sounds between English and their home language (Shakkour, 2014). Multilingual learners benefit from additional time spent reading and talking about texts under the guidance of or with feedback from a teacher and in ways that are connected to generative activities. That is, students are not merely asked to read more or receive repeated instruction but they are given additional opportunities to make connections, think, and talk about what they are reading.

This need for additional opportunities to learn has implications for scheduling literacy blocks, the coherence between the literacy block and ESL, and tiered instruction for individual students. Schools need to consider scheduling so that students designated as English learners get extra opportunities to learn but are not entirely excluded from educational experiences, and ensure that students are getting the literacy exposure and practice throughout their school day in a language and literacy infused learning environment beyond the literacy block.

3 INTERDEPENDENCE OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY

A. Multilingual learners need to develop language proficiency in order to read and write successfully. Language is a key component in reading and writing.

> *"Literacy is a secondary system, dependent on language as the primary system, so effective teachers need to know a good deal about language"* (Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2006, p. 17).
>
> *"Literacy is an achievement that rests on language competence at all levels, from the elemental sounds to the most overarching structures of text"* (Moats, 2010, p. 2).

The quotes above articulate the interdependent relationship between literacy and language. All developing readers and writers need to develop language skills for literacy, and multilingual learners are developing language skills in a new language in addition to their home language. The role of language is critical in comprehension and as a part of reading as a meaning-making activity. Language includes oral language as well as knowledge of syntax at the sentence level and genre knowledge (e.g., how we read narratives versus how we read math problems). Understanding sentence structures contributes to comprehension (Shanahan, 2013) and becoming genre-aware contributes to deeper comprehension of meaning (Brisk, 2022; Gebhard, 2019). The explicit teaching of how language works in texts is critical to access meanings in text. For these reasons, all students, but specifically multilingual learners, need explicit instruction that develops linguistic knowledge in the context of reading and writing. Often multilingual learners receive language support, but not adequate language development instruction. For example, visuals and realia support access to texts, but they do little to teach language in the context of reading and writing texts (Goldenberg, 2020).

The development of language skills should be amplified during ESL instruction in connection to the literacy objectives outlined within daily core ELA instruction. Language instruction should also be a central component of the tier 1 literacy block where multilingual learners have extended opportunities through small group instruction and peer conversations to develop language in connection to the literacy objectives of the core content lesson. Tier 2 and 3 instruction should focus on amplifying and supporting the development of language skills multilingual learners need in service of accessing Tier 1 texts and content.

B. Code-based and meaning-based literacy skills are interdependent.

Multilingual learners benefit from a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction that supports *simultaneous* and *interdependent* development of code-based and meaning-based skills in the context of a knowledge-building curriculum. Skilled reading in a new language requires both code-based skills (e.g., concepts of print, phonological awareness, and phonics) and meaning-based skills (e.g., oral language, comprehension, knowledge) (Gottardo & Mueller, 2009). Bridging processes such as vocabulary and fluency facilitate reading comprehension and draw on and reinforce both code- and meaning-based skills (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). Other variables can also influence an individual's development of code and meaning based skills, such as executive functioning and the use of strategies (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). Note that the Massachusetts Literacy Guide outlines foundational skills that make up some of the components of literacy and uses the Simple View to describe all of the skills for early reading. This resource extends these frameworks for multilingual learners in particular by emphasizing the *interconnectedness* and *interdependence* of all reading and writing skills, the particular salience of linguistic comprehension for multilingual learners, and the need for the separable components of literacy to be developed in connection to meaning.

While understanding the components of reading and writing are necessary, effective literacy instructional approaches for multilingual learners treat code-based and meaning-based skills as inseparable. Students should not be expected to master code-based skills as a prerequisite for meaning-based work (Dougherty Stahl, 2011). For example, while students are still learning phonics, curriculum should include meaning-based activities such as discussions of complex texts, interactive read alouds, the development of language comprehension, and understanding of text genre, audience, and purpose (Brisk, 2022). It is vitally important to communicate to students that the purpose of code-based skills is to allow them to engage in meaning-based reading, writing, and thinking. When literacy instruction includes an overemphasis on practice in code-based skills without connection to its meaning, multilingual learners lose sight of the goal of using literacy to express and critique worthwhile ideas (Beck & Beck, 2013).

For multilingual learners in particular, code-based skill instruction should be implemented in connection to meaning in order to support orthographic mapping for children who are unfamiliar with the English language. Multilingual learners benefit from systematic and explicit phonics instruction when it is done in connection to meaning and builds on children's knowledge of their home language. Multilingual children need to learn decoding skills while also learning their purpose (e.g., how sentences connect together to create coherent texts that convey ideas). Otherwise, they may use the foundational reading skills they acquire to read simple narratives, but fail to make progress when presented with complex texts. In fact, for all students and especially multilingual learners, literacy instruction that builds on reading for meaning and understanding must occur simultaneously with foundational skills instruction. Neither multilingual learners nor any other students should be expected to develop code-based skills as a prerequisite to accessing a curriculum that emphasizes meaning and knowledge building (Dougherty Stahl, 2011; Lesaux et al., 2010).

The interdependence of code- and meaning-based literacy skills has implications for ESL program models and the implementation of instructional materials. Schools and teachers will need to consider the alignment and coherence of instruction so that the right emphasis is placed in literacy instruction within ESL, bilingual programming (if applicable), and the core literacy block based on individual students' strengths and needs.

TERMINOLOGY

Below is a list of terms and concepts used in the document that the reader may find helpful:

Multilingual learners - culturally and linguistically diverse learners, including those designated as English learners, former English learners, dual language learners, newcomers, students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE), long-term English learners, English learners with disabilities, heritage language learners, and students who speak varieties of English or indigenous languages

English learners - students whose home language is not English and are entitled to English language services based on the state's classification criteria

Code-based skills - literacy skills required for word recognition such as concepts of print, phonological awareness, and phonics

Meaning-based skills - literacy skills required for comprehension, interpretation and application of meaning in texts such as oral language, comprehension, literacy knowledge

Metalinguistic awareness - the ability to think about and reflect on language-meaning relationships

Cross-linguistic - describing the connection between languages (similarities and differences) and how an individual uses their linguistic repertoire to read, communicate with, and understand a given language

Translanguaging – the act and process that multilingual people use to communicate and make meaning through two or more languages

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