

Promising Practice: Linguistic Support in SLIFE Education

Linguistic support for students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) encompasses a range of instructional approaches to foster English development while nurturing students' home language skills. Students identified as SLIFE bring a rich tapestry of linguistic and cultural assets to their educational journey. Strong linguistic support leverages these assets, recognizing the value of students' diverse backgrounds. While there is limited research on SLIFE education, some key linguistic supports have emerged:

- **Build on students' existing linguistic knowledge.** Leveraging students' home language skills can facilitate English development and content learning (Cummins, 2001; Prevoo et al., 2016).
- **Provide explicit instruction in academic language.** SLIFE benefit from targeted support in developing academic language structures across content areas (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010).
- **Integrate language and content instruction.** Approaches like sheltered instruction and content-based language teaching can help SLIFE develop English proficiency while learning grade-level content (Short & Boyson, 2012).
- **Focus on oral language development.** Many SLIFE have stronger oral language skills than literacy skills, so instruction should build on this strength while developing reading and writing (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011).
- **Differentiate instruction.** Given the diverse backgrounds and needs of SLIFE, instruction should be tailored to individual students' language proficiency levels and educational experiences (DeCapua et al., 2020).
- **Use visual supports and realia.** Concrete objects, images, and graphic organizers can help make language and content more accessible to SLIFE (Cohan & Honigsfeld, 2017).
- **Provide structured opportunities for peer interaction.** Collaborative learning activities can provide authentic contexts for language use and support social integration (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010).

Related Resources from the Massachusetts (MA) Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)

- **SLIFE Guidance:** Explore Step 4 of DESE's [Guidance for SLIFE Identification, Services, and Support](#), paying special attention to pp. 27–33 on academic support.
- **SLIFE Toolkit:** Visit the [academic and linguistic support section](#) of the MA SLIFE Toolkit for practical strategies and resources.
- **Blueprint for English Learner (EL) Success:** Review the [Interactive Blueprint for English Learner Success](#), focusing on Pillar 3: Opportunity and Support, Building Block 2: Academic and Linguistic Supports. Discover strategies for implementation at the [classroom](#), [school](#), [district](#), and [state](#) levels.

Research Corner

- [Learning With the Field: Understanding “Promising Practices” for Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education \(SLIFE\) in Massachusetts Schools](#) (Kray & Burns, 2024)
- [Understanding and Supporting Students With Limited or Interrupted Formal Education \(SLIFE\) in Massachusetts: A Review of Literature](#) (CAL, 2024)

Language Foundations: Linguistic Support in SLIFE Education

This vignette is based primarily on interviews with educators from two different districts, with additional insights from interviews with other members of the MA SLIFE Community of Practice (CoP). While district names and some details have been changed to maintain anonymity, the strategies, challenges, and successes described here are based on real experiences of CoP members. The composite nature of this vignette allows us to showcase a range of approaches and ideas that can be adapted to various contexts across Massachusetts.



Setting: *Linden Public Schools is a large urban district serving approximately 13,000 students. About 42% of students are classified as ELs. The district has a long history of serving newcomers and SLIFE. Many students have experience in agricultural work or informal economies in their home countries.*

Kingsley Public Schools serves about 8,000 students, approximately 13% of whom are ELs. Recent SLIFE arrivals include unaccompanied minors from El Salvador and Honduras, as well as Haitian students who lived in Chile or Brazil before coming to the United States. About 1% of the student body is identified as SLIFE.

Linden’s Comprehensive Approach to Language Development

Dr. Carla Mendoza, director of EL education, emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive approach to language development for SLIFE. “Our students often have complex linguistic backgrounds,” she explains. “Many speak indigenous languages like Mam or K’iche’, with Spanish as their first language of formal instruction. Now they’re learning English as a third language. We need to consider all of these languages in our instruction.” In this context, Dr. Mendoza emphasizes the importance of **initial assessment** and **individual goal setting**. “Before we can provide robust linguistic support, we need to understand where each student is starting from,” she explains. “We conduct thorough assessments when students arrive, then set individual goals with each student. We **involve families** in this process and periodically revisit these goals to track progress.”

“We’ve created a teacher-made curriculum focusing on Spanish language development,” Dr. Mendoza shares. “While many of our students speak indigenous languages like Mam and K’iche’ as their first language, Spanish is often their language of prior academic instruction. The classes previously available were based on curricula for second language learners of Spanish, which wasn’t appropriate for our context. With our class, we focus on foundational skills using strategies in Spanish that we also apply in English language arts (ELA).” Teachers are trained to help students make connections between home language(s) and English. This includes explicit instruction in **cognates** and **contrastive analysis of language features**. “We encourage students to use their first or second language to understand similarities and differences,” Dr. Mendoza explains.

Recognizing the importance of **oral language development**, Linden has implemented a “**dialogic approach**” across classrooms. “We noticed that in our classes, over 50% of the discussion was teacher talk, meaning students were mostly listening,” Dr. Mendoza shares. “To address this, we are rethinking our lesson planning to better balance speaking and listening activities. Lessons now emphasize student conversation while remaining text-based, encouraging students to infer meaning from texts rather than just pictures.” One strategy teachers use is the “**language experience approach**,” where students dictate stories based on personal experiences, which are then used as reading material. This enhances reading skills while validating and building upon students’ own linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Linden also offers intensive English as a second language (ESL) classes. These classes, which meet daily, focus on accelerating English development through **explicit language instruction** and **content-based learning**. “Our ESL classes are designed to build students’ English proficiency while also developing key academic concepts,” Dr. Mendoza explains. “We use **high-interest, age-appropriate materials** and incorporate lots of **interactive** activities to keep students engaged.”

Teachers also use extensive **modeling** and demonstration. “We show students what we want them to do,” Dr. Mendoza notes. “This includes **guided reading sessions**, where we model reading strategies, and **demonstrations of academic tasks**.” At the high school level, Linden uses a reading intervention program designed specifically for SLIFE students, adapted from Reading Recovery principles. Linden has also **partnered with local organizations** to bring **volunteers** into SLIFE classrooms. “These volunteers don’t provide instruction,” Dr. Mendoza clarifies, “but they support independent work, guiding students and providing support when needed. This allows our teachers to work more intensively with small groups.”

Kingsley’s Targeted Approach for Secondary SLIFE

In Kingsley, the focus has been on developing targeted linguistic supports for secondary SLIFE. Florina Stanescu, ESL teacher for newcomer and SLIFE students at Kingsley High School, describes their approach as follows: “We’ve developed a program that addresses both the academic and practical needs of our SLIFE. Many of our students are working full-time jobs in addition to attending school, so we need to make every moment count.” Kingsley’s approach to differentiated instruction is highly **individualized**. “We see each student as an individual with unique strengths and needs,” says Ms. Stanescu. “Our instruction is tailored to meet these specific needs, whether it’s extra support in **phonics, vocabulary development, or academic language use**.”

Kingsley has recently adopted a structured approach to teaching **foundational literacy skills**. “We use a program called HD Word through Really Great Reading,” Ms. Stanescu explains. “It’s a 20-minute daily program that covers all 44 phonemes of the English language in 35 lessons.” Kingsley also uses a version of the Frayer model for **vocabulary development**, adapted specifically for SLIFE. “We provide a **translation** for each word that we introduce,” Ms. Stanescu explains. “And if we have multiple languages spoken in the classroom, we make sure that each language is mirrored.” Ms. Stanescu adds, “I often switch the order of languages because I do not want students to internalize that there is a hierarchy of languages. In other words, the Spanish does not always appear first. Sometimes it is Haitian Creole, sometimes it is Portuguese or Thai.”

Both Linden and Kingsley make extensive use of **visual supports**. Ms. Stanescu notes that in Kingsley, “We have visuals for common phrases newcomers might need, like asking to go to the bathroom or get a drink of water. These visuals span all content areas and language domains, helping students navigate both social and academic aspects of school life.” Several Kingsley classrooms have also implemented a **“word wall” in multiple languages**, featuring high-frequency words and academic vocabulary. Teachers use **“sentence frames”** to move beyond the word/phrase dimension of language and support academic discourse. “We use a variety of strategies to accelerate English development, including **targeted vocabulary instruction, structured oral language practice, and intensive reading and writing activities**.”

Kingsley has also implemented a strategic **buddy system**. “We pair students thoughtfully,” Ms. Stanescu explains. “Sometimes we pair students who share a language, other times we create cross-language pairs. We’re very intentional about when and how we use these pairings to maximize language learning.” Both Ms. Stanescu and her co-teacher, Matthew Anderson, the ELA teacher, emphasize the importance of **peer-to-peer collaborative learning** for SLIFE. “The kids love helping and teaching each other,” Mr. Anderson shares. “We’ve

found that collaborative activities not only support language development but also help build a sense of community among students.”

The work done in Linden and Kingsley reminds us that linguistic support for SLIFE requires a multifaceted, flexible approach that honors students’ existing knowledge and experiences, while providing targeted instruction that expands what students can do with language in an ever-growing range of contexts. As demographics evolve and new challenges arise, Linden and Kingsley continually refine their practices, always prioritizing the unique strengths and needs of their students.

Reflection Questions: Linguistic Support



1. How does your current program address the specific linguistic needs of SLIFE? Are there elements from Linden’s or Kingsley’s approaches that could be adapted for your context?
2. In what ways does your curriculum make connections between content learning and language development for SLIFE? How might this be improved?
3. How are you currently promoting oral language development for SLIFE? Are there opportunities to increase student talk time in your classrooms?
4. How are you currently assessing and supporting home language literacy for SLIFE? What resources might you need to enhance this support?
5. What technology resources are available in your district to support SLIFE language development? How effectively are these being used?

Actions to Consider: Linguistic Support

✪ Explore guidance and practical resources in the **MA SLIFE Toolkit**, [Step 4: Academic and Linguistic Supports](#).



- **Create space for ample oral practice.** Provide daily, sustained opportunities for SLIFE to develop oral language skills.
- **Form a bridge from oral language skills to written literacy.** Tap into student strengths with spoken communication and create pathways for them to transfer those abilities into the written word. This approach capitalizes on what students already know, providing a familiar foundation on which to build their literacy skills.
- **Implement a structured literacy program** to support foundational literacy skills.
- **Support student skill transfer.** While some SLIFE may have nascent literacy skills in their home languages, others may be able to transfer significant home language reading and writing skills to support the development of English.
- **Strategically support students** to access complex text.
- **Implement a cross-curricular, project-based learning initiative** with a focus on language development—for example, through a multilingual digital storytelling project.
- **Promote the development and use of multiple languages.** Create a multilingual resource hub for teachers to share materials and strategies. For example, establish a multilingual book club or create a multilingual student newspaper or podcast.
- **Consider implementing a co-teaching model** in core content areas to provide integrated language and content instruction.
- **Develop a summer intensive language program** to provide additional learning opportunities.