

Expanding the Scope of Reading to Include Multilingual Learners

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Abstract

In 2023-2024, English Language Learners (ELLs) comprised 10% of K-12 students nationwide and 11% in New York State. This diverse and growing population includes both U.S.-born multilingual students (estimated at 85%) and those who are new arrivals.

While the Science of Reading (SoR) has come to inform literacy instruction policies in the U.S., additional consideration of the process of second language acquisition and issues that come with bilingualism is necessary. Many studies do not fully address the needs of ELLs and other multilingual learners (MLs), and this significant population's needs should be addressed. This brief advocates for expanding the studies to include research-based practices that support bilingualism, biliteracy, and culturally responsive pedagogy. It also highlights the ontological differences between multilingual and monolingual learners, and argues that addressing these distinctions is essential to ensuring equitable and effective literacy instruction.

on·to·log·i·cal (adjective)

1. Relating to ontology, the philosophical study of being. It is the study of existence and the structure of reality.
2. Describes a set of concepts and categories within a subject area that shows the properties and relations between them.

Understanding the Bilingual Brain

Being bilingual is different than being monolingual because the two languages interact linguistically, psychologically, culturally, cognitively and emotionally within a student's brain. Our challenge as educators is to view these differences as assets.



English Language Learner (ELL)

An ELL is a student who speaks or understands language(s) other than English, is developing English language skills, and who scores below a State-designated level of proficiency on the English Language Proficiency Assessment.

Multilingual Learner (ML)

Multilingual Learner refers to all students who speak or are learning one or more language(s) other than English, including current ELLs, former (exited) ELLs, students who were never ELLs but are heritage speakers of a language other than English, and World Languages students.

This brief addresses:

Methods to ensure that reading instruction is inclusive of ELLs and MLs, including a short description of the ontological differences between ELLs and MLs and monolingual English learners.

How to address these ontological differences in the classroom.

How an expanded scope is critical to academic success for ELLs and MLs.

A Look Inside a Literacy Lesson

Ms. Cunningham is teaching her first grade class a lesson in phonological awareness. The class is learning how phonemes combine to make words that have meaning. This lesson is from a reading program her school uses, and she believes it is a good way to help all students learn to read. But even though the lesson may work for native English speakers, it doesn't fully support students who are learning English as a new language.

For example, when Ms. Cunningham says, "Let's clap the number of sounds we hear in the word *sofa*," ELLs might not understand that she wants them to clap for each sound, not each syllable. This is confusing for students who are used to learning in another language, like Spanish, where words are often broken into syllables. Also, the students need to know what a *sofa* is, that it may also be called a *couch*. They need to understand what *clap* means, and how to count the sounds in English. Without pictures or explanations in their first language, ELLs may not fully understand the lesson.

Strategies for Success

- Build background knowledge
- Provide visuals
- Leverage cognates
- Choose materials that reflect your students
- Make connections to students' home languages

Conclusions

- The teaching of foundational skills is important, but it should not be the sole focus of reading instruction for ELLs and MLs.
- Research has shown that ELLs and MLs attain decoding skills at comparable levels to their monolingual peers, but lag behind in comprehension and writing. This points to the need for an approach to help students acquire vocabulary and background knowledge to make meaning from what they are reading.
- An expanded literacy experience benefits ALL learners, not just ELLs.

Reflect and Apply

- Am I unintentionally relying on monolingual assumptions in my literacy instruction?
- How can I better leverage the home languages and cultural backgrounds of my ML students?
- How might I adapt materials and assessments to be more linguistically and culturally accessible?