

Teaching Reading in Multilingual Classrooms: Moving Beyond a Deficit Perspective

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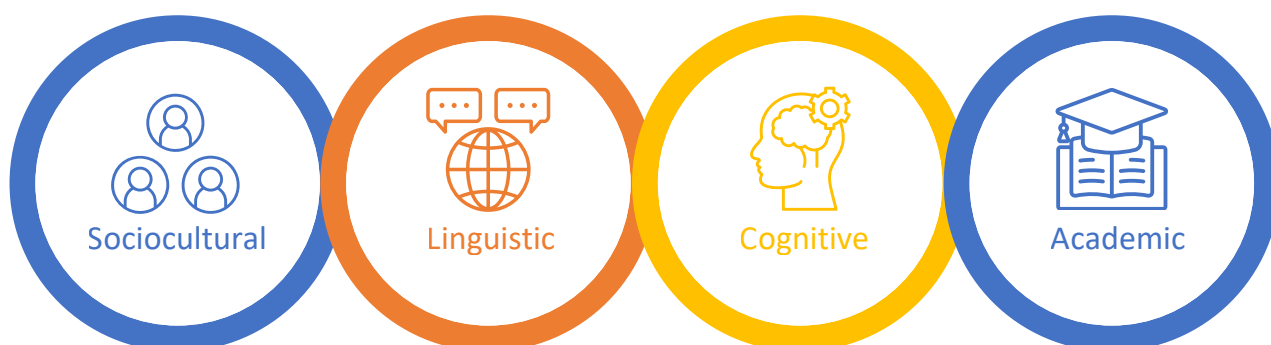
This brief addresses the critical importance of shifting from a deficit perspective to an asset-based approach in teaching reading to English Language Learners (ELLs) and Multilingual Learners (MLs). It emphasizes that an educator's understanding of a student's biography — encompassing sociocultural, linguistic, cognitive, and academic dimensions — is crucial for effective literacy development. The brief highlights how a narrow view of literacy, often exacerbated by standardized testing not designed for multilingual learners, can overlook students' existing linguistic assets from their home languages (L1) and lead to inappropriate interventions. It argues that recognizing and leveraging these L1 assets can significantly accelerate literacy development in English (L2) by building on established language-processing pathways. The brief also suggests alternative assessment methods, such as observing language use in various contexts and collaborating with families, to gain a more accurate understanding of a student's linguistic capabilities. Ultimately, it advocates for instructional practices and interventions that are guided by the student's unique multilingual biography, ensuring that all students have equitable access to robust literacy growth and academic achievement.

The Student Biography

A learner's biography creates a picture of the whole child. When more than one language is involved, it is important to know how, when, and where each language is used, and how proficient the student is in each, both receptively and expressively.

Early Language Matters

Children begin developing literacy well before school, through early exposure to language, songs, and stories in the home. Recognizing and building on this foundation is essential, especially for students learning to read in a language different from their first.



Key Questions on Fundamental Aspects of Language

- What are the similarities and differences between English and L1?
- How can educators use these similarities or differences to bridge skills and knowledge?
- How can knowledge of the differences between L1 and L2 help with literacy instruction?
- How can educators identify literacy skills and needs through observation of the student's use of familiar L1 and/or L2 words?
- How can educators consider all dimensions of the student biography and other factors that might be impacting perceived performance?
- How well does the student learn new routines, chores, and expectations at home?
- How can educators partner with the parent(s)/family to build connections and/or make content relevant to students?

Use Assessments with Caution

Overreliance on standardized tests and narrow literacy screeners can misrepresent ELLs' and MLs' abilities, leading to incorrect placement and limiting opportunities for higher-order learning. Instead, dynamic assessments and family input should be used to better understand students' true capabilities.

Family Partnerships

Strong, respectful collaboration with families goes beyond sending home translated materials. It involves gathering insights about language use, literacy practices, and daily life to inform instruction and affirm the students' identities and experiences.

Conclusions

To foster real literacy development among ELLs and MLs, educators must adopt a broader, more inclusive perspective that values student assets over deficits, community knowledge over assumptions, and home language as a resource rather than an obstacle. This approach not only supports language development but also promotes equity, engagement, and academic achievement for all learners.

Reflect and Apply

As educators plan and deliver reading instruction, the road map they use takes into consideration the terrain and conditions for the individual learner. Teachers who understand the language systems of L1 use this knowledge to advance the learning of their ELLs and MLs.

- How are every child's language assets documented and used to advance/accelerate learning to read? How do such assets support or provide a lens on how to best advance and meet the needs of the learner?
- What considerations connected to the sociocultural, linguistic, cognitive, and academic dimensions of the learner might inform your instruction, interventions, and strategies to support students to make cross-linguistic connections?