



TEACHING READING IN MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOMS: MOVING BEYOND A DEFICIT PERSPECTIVE

THE OFFICE OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION AND WORLD LANGUAGES
BRIEF 2



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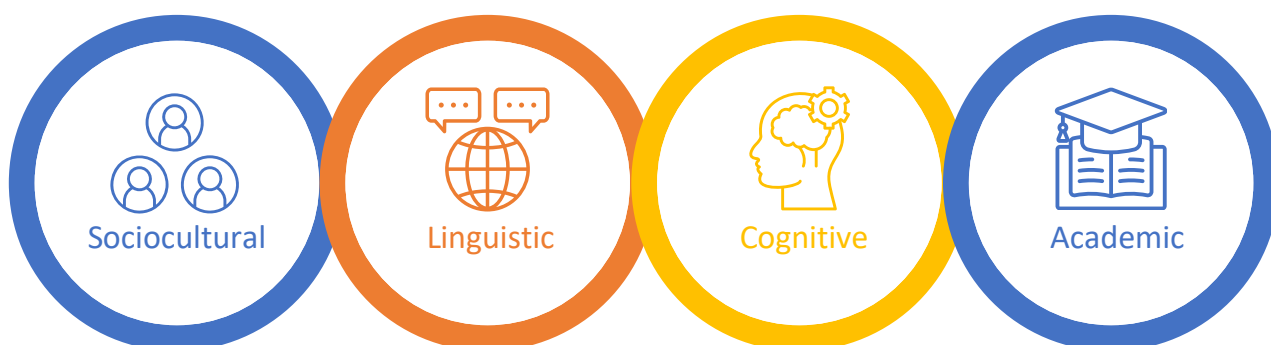


Introduction

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A crucial, yet often overlooked, factor in literacy development is the educator's understanding of their student's biography and potential. This takes a focused look at the power a teacher's perspective, or "lens", has to impact the trajectory of student learning at school and beyond. Its purpose is to guide administrators, teachers, and support staff in understanding how to develop all students' abundant linguistic assets within structured literacy instruction (Herrera, 2022; Kelchtermans, 2014).

Moving beyond a "deficit lens" to recognize and leverage these assets can transform classroom practice and unlock new levels of student achievement. The student biography is a conceptual tool for developing a more holistic understanding of the learner (Herrera, 2022). It incorporates four interrelated dimensions – sociocultural, linguistic, cognitive, and academic – that influence how a child sees the world and engages in learning.



Knowledge of a student's biography is critical to an educator's understanding of these four dimensions, which impact pre-literacy, literacy, and the teaching of reading in the classroom. Planning and delivering effective, learner-centered instruction requires acknowledging that the student's sociocultural experiences (e.g., poverty, immigration), linguistic background (e.g., home language, cultural discourse patterns), cognitive development (e.g., neuroscience, ways of knowing), and home environment (e.g., reading with parents, exposure to texts and stories) affect formal reading instruction (Holmes, 2023; Wetzel et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2018).

On the next page, we explain why understanding the linguistic dimension of the student's biography is essential for language arts education and literacy development, and how it can guide the planning and delivery of reading instruction for English Language Learners (ELLs), Multilingual Learners (MLs) which include ELLs, Former/Ever ELLs, and heritage speakers of World Languages, and Early Multilingual Learners (EMLs) at the preschool level.

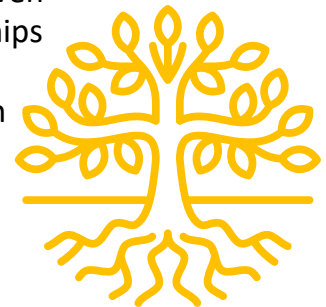


Literacy Development: Art and Science

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As literacy development occurs, a network of neural connections is developed among complexes of sounds and vocalizations, systems of meaning, and textual signs on the page. Even before receiving formal instruction, a student’s pre-reading and reading activities are grounded in a rich linguistic foundation. This foundation begins to be established in earliest infancy, through the caregiver’s words and stories, rhymes, sounds, and songs (Horowitz-Kraus et al., 2024; Kuhl, 2011).

All children enter the classroom with their own linguistic backgrounds, which govern how oral and written language are already tightly woven through the meaningful objects, places, experiences, and relationships in their lives. Reading instruction anchors print awareness in this foundation, connecting the student’s prior understanding of spoken language to the letters and words on the page. Like the roots of a tree, this foundation nourishes and stabilizes the branching growth of literacy, which, in turn, promotes the deepening of meaning (National Research Council, 2010; Shanahan & Lonigan, 2012).

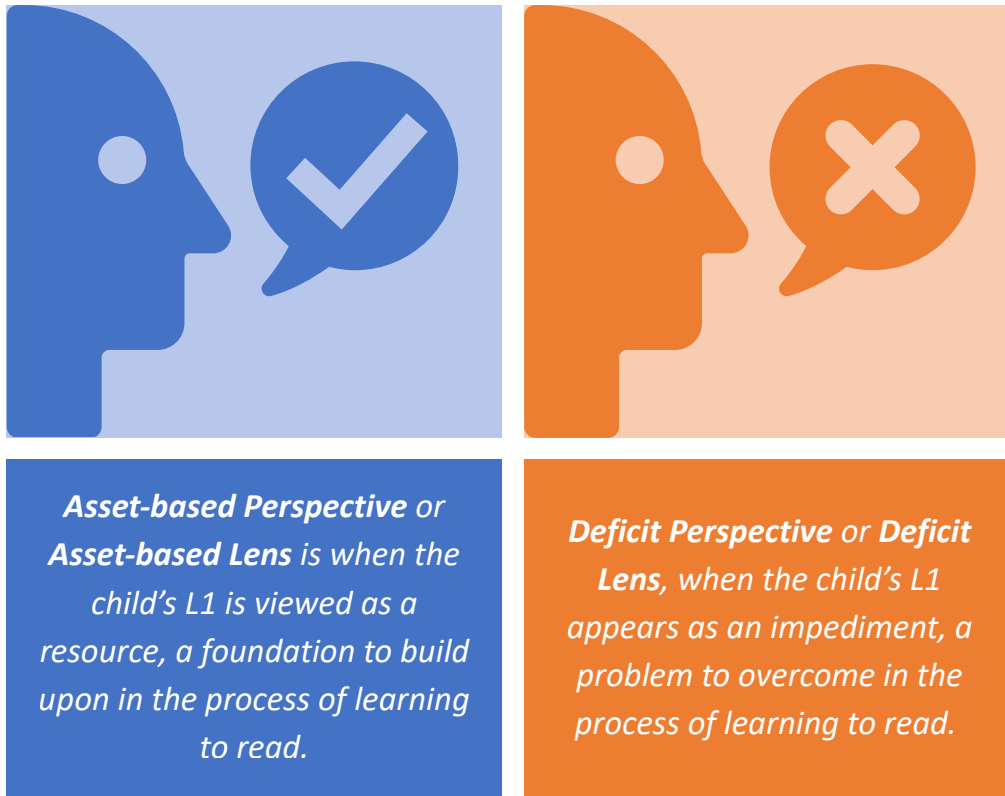


Simplified models of literacy development provide educators with scaffolds to conceptualize the relationship of language and print. Emphasis on such representations can, however, result in narrowed perceptions and prescriptions of the speech, language, and symbol experiences involved in learning to read. This is especially true for ELLs and MLs who are not being taught to read in their home language (L1); these students’ prior experience with speech and language will vary widely. This variance may apply to the home language’s phonemic palette (i.e., sounds and vocalizations from which students are able to draw), prosody (i.e. rhythmic patterns), written script, and grammatical structure—not to mention the wellsprings of cultural meaning. For many ELLs and MLs, these stories remain untold, which may result in the student’s linguistic cognition remaining untapped in the process of reading instruction (Olsen, 2022; Yoon, 2020).

Linguistic Cognition	Phonemic Palette (i.e., sounds and vocalizations)
	Prosody (i.e. rhythmic patterns)
	Written Script
	Grammatical Structure
	Cultural Meaning

A Narrow View of Literacy

All too often, successful reading instruction for ELLs and MLs is impeded by a “deficit perspective” or “deficit lens” on the part of the educators. From this point of view, the child’s L1 appears as an impediment, a problem to be overcome in the process of learning to read.



Although there are differences in languages that should be considered and used to support learners’ metalinguistic awareness, a deficit lens centers on challenges rather than assets. Educators may focus on the student’s challenges to such an extent that they are unable to look past and see the potential assets of the home language that already belong to the child—the existing “funds of knowledge” and linguistic repertoire that they carry with them from home and into the classroom. It is impossible to leverage assets we can’t see or don’t acknowledge. For this reason, educators who perceive their ELL and ML students through a deficit lens tend to overlook opportunities to aid their students in robust literacy development (McDevitt, 2016; Poza & Valdés, 2021).

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Caveats of Standardized Testing as Indicators for Reading Difficulties for ELLs and MLs

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One practice that exacerbates the deficit lens is the administration of screeners and assessments that are not designed for, and do not include accommodations to address, the needs of ELLs and MLs. As further discussed in this series, the scope and sensitivity of assessments, and the resulting formats and rationales of reading intervention, factor hugely in the successful literacy development of ELLs and MLs. Static, point-in-time assessments may fail to accurately reflect these students' actual linguistic capacities and potentials. As a result, educators may lack clear documentation of the foundational skills and knowledge that their students bring from community, home, and prior schooling experiences; this could lead to the use of inappropriately designed interventions that fail to address students' actual needs (Brown & Zhang, 2023; Phillips & Stox, 2023).

Over reliance on static screeners sets conditions for a variety of negative consequences. For example, when a targeted skill exists in the L1 but not in the second language (L2), the assessment may mistakenly give the impression that the student lacks the skill developmentally, resulting in denied instructional opportunity. Test-driven interventions may result in a remedial instructional focus on decontextualized subskills, reducing opportunity for ELLs and MLs to develop and demonstrate higher order thinking. Reduced opportunity to participate in language-rich instruction tends to diminish students' exposure to peers with stronger L2 skills, as well as time spent on expanded or deepened content (Morita-Mullaney et al, 2015).

These effects may compound over time through yearly reassignment to the least rigorous instructional tiers. The confluence of these factors results in low expectations of the student, severely limiting their potential for cognitive growth and academic achievement.



To avoid such pitfalls, educators can utilize other means of gathering data for ELLs and MLs. Observing language use during the child's play or interactions with peers can inform conditions under which the student successfully applies the targeted skill. Collaborating with the parent/family to determine whether a skill is evident in the home context or in the student's L1 can provide additional insights into actual development (Johnson & Johnson, 2016).



Instruction and Intervention Guided by Multilingual Learner Biography

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Assessment and instructional practices which recognize the assets that ELLs and MLs bring from home and community potentiate learner progress and cognitive, social, and academic success in multiple, mutually reinforcing ways. This begins with student willingness to engage in learning: educators recruit students' innate drive to associate new learning to known experience by recognizing and utilizing L1 in assessment and instruction (García & Kleyn, 2016; Gottlieb, 2021). This allows students to become more active participants in their own processes of literacy development.

From a cognitive perspective, the thoughtful assessment and utilization of L1 assets can speed literacy development by affirming the connection of new literacy skills to established pathways of language processing. One such assessment is the Multilingual SIFE Screener, which is designed to evaluate the literacy and math skills of ELLs, particularly of newly arrived immigrants; the MLS is supported by NYSED and is available in 19 languages (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2016). Use of targeted assessments such as this better equips the educator to discover and employ L2 anchor points for new skills that function in both languages and to intervene for the establishment of subskills only where strictly necessary (Lesaux et al, 2010).

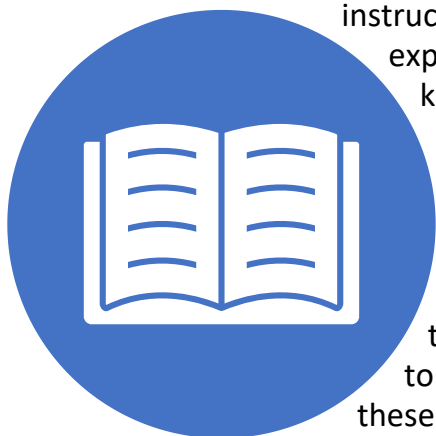


Another useful tool for identifying L1 assets is the EML Profile which is administered to all NYS prekindergarten students. By laying the groundwork on an existing foundation, the educator can maximize their allocation of instructional resources to the interventions that are truly needed for development of wholly new or contrastive concepts and skills.



Read more at [NYSED.gov](https://www.nysed.gov) on *Emergent Multilingual Learners in Prekindergarten Programs*

Moving beyond the basics, educators’ efforts to leverage L1 assets in assessment and instruction tend to foster an acknowledgment of diverse learner experience and purposes in literacy development. With this knowledge, teachers are more able to support ELLs’ and MLs’ efforts to effectively engage with and learn from challenging and authentic texts (Cummins, 2011). A teacher could then seek to advance their students’ higher order thinking by assigning culturally relevant texts that connect to the students’ real-world, lived experiences, thereby increasing the students’ responsiveness and ability to access content and language (Gottlieb, 2023). Together, these shifts exponentially increase student access to the literacy growth and content knowledge available through reading.



Regardless of the preferred model for conceptualizing literacy development, foundational knowledge and skills used in reading originate in the home. Only through recognition and integration of these home-based assets can instruction adequately represent literacy development for ELLs and MLs and illuminate these students’ paths to becoming skilled readers (Genesee et al., 2006). Careful observation and active attention from the educator, aided by the support of administration and staff, can radically alter the reading trajectory of ELLs and MLs, with benefits for all students.



Figures 1 and 2 on the next two pages provide two examples of Linguistic Biography Cards, as well as a template that an educator might use in preparing ELLs and MLs for successful pathways to literacy. We’ve also highlighted some key questions to inform teachers on fundamental aspects of language that serve as the foundation to literacy.



Page 7	<i>Figure 1 Sample Note-Taking Tool for Student Biography</i>
Page 8	<i>Figure 2 Sample Note-Taking Tool for Student Biography</i>
Pages 9-11	<i>Key Questions on Fundamental Aspects of Language</i>

Figure 1 - Sample Note-Taking Tool for Student Biography

LITERACY FROM HOME TO SCHOOL		
Student Linguistic Assets		
Home:		Insights Gained:
School:		
Typical Day for this Student: <i>(outside of school)</i>		
How have I (educator) considered all dimensions of the student biography and any factors that might be impacting perceived performance? Explain.		
How am I partnering with the parents/family to build bridges, connections, and/or make content relevant to the student?		
How well does the student learn new chores, routines, and expectations at home?		
How does the student use language for multiple purposes outside of school (cross-community context)?		
INSTRUCTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS		
Given this student's biography, what strategies would best support their learning needs?	What student behaviors (processing) are observed during direct instruction, group work, and independent work?	What scaffolds or supports are needed to help the student acquire both language and content?
NOTICINGS		

Figure 2 - Sample Note-Taking Tool for Student Biography

STUDENT			
NAME	AGE	GRADE	YEARS ENROLLED IN U.S SCHOOLS
LANGUAGE(S) FROM HOME			
HOME LANGUAGE(S)		L1 USAGE	
L1		WITH WHOM DOES THE STUDENT USE THEIR L1?	
PROFICIENCY (speaking, reading, listening, and/or writing in L1?)			
IS THE L1 A WRITTEN LANGUAGE?	YES / NO	RECEPTIVELY:	
L2		EXPRESSIVELY:	
OTHER LANGUAGE(S)			
CONNECTIONS			
L1 & L2 COMMONALITIES			
Are there similarities or differences between the L1 and English? If so what are they?	How am I (the educator) using the similarities to bridge skills and knowledge?	How am I (the educator) using the differences to teach skills and knowledge?	
CONSIDERATIONS			
Under what conditions would translation and/or translanguaging aid participation and learning?			
ASSESSMENT FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY			
READING	WRITING	LISTENING	SPEAKING
What language skills are used for decision making (e.g., phonics, comprehension, vocabulary, fluency)?		How were these language skills and needs identified?	
NOTICINGS			
USE THIS SECTION TO ADD ANECDOTAL NOTES ON THE STUDENT			



Key Questions on Fundamental Aspects of Language

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What are the similarities and differences between English and L1?

When addressing this question, it is crucial to think about all aspects of the language system. What similarities and differences are there in the sounds of the different languages? What are the rules that govern each language, including which consonants can be blended, if any, and in what position of words? (Yavas, 2020). For example, many second language learners from China have issues with /r/ while Spanish speakers may have issues with /w/ (Fabiano-Smith & Goldstein, 2010). Teachers need to have an awareness of cognates, especially for the Romance languages, many of whose academic words share a Latin root. Teachers need to understand that vocabulary may vary from one community or region to another; take, for example, the many regional differences in vocabulary of American English speakers (e.g., water fountain versus bubbler, sneakers versus tennis shoes) (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015).

Educators should consider how language is used within the home; for example, do children engage in rich conversations with family or are they expected to observe the conversation of adults? Such information can guide instruction to be meaningful and relevant, and it will help the teacher become a better analyst to determine each student's assets (Gottlieb, 2023).

How can educators use these similarities or differences to bridge skills/knowledge?

Understanding the similarities between students' two (or more) languages provides the teacher with specific information they can build upon to reinforce learning. These similarities can be used to add meaning for the student and provide insight into the structures/rules that may apply to the languages (Helman et al., 2012). For example, if the L1 and the L2 contain similar sounds, teachers can pull from the L1 to support learning to read using phonemes in the L2. For instance, if the child's L1 has the /s/ sound (e.g., *sopa* in Spanish) this can be used to connect and reinforce the learning of the /s/ sound in English (L2) (Dressler & Kamil, 2006). The letter 's' is also used to mark plurality in English and Spanish text (Gottlieb, 2023). Phonological similarities and patterns (e.g., *dogs/perros*) can also be highlighted in the context of teaching 's'. Utilizing sounds or words from the L1 attaches meaning, which allows students to better conceptualize the skill as opposed to being required to learn through an unfamiliar word in a different language (Ramirez et al, 2013).



Key Questions on Fundamental Aspects of Language Continued

How can knowledge of the differences between L1 and L2 help with literacy instruction?

Insight into the differences between a student's L1(s) and L2 can help educators understand the specific language structures, sounds, rules, etc. that can impact a student's performance and ability to "pick up" literacy skills (Genesee et al., 2006; Helman et al., 2012). For example, a student whose home language is Spanish may struggle to associate a picture of an apple shown with the sound /ă/ because in their L1 it is manzana (/m/). Having this insight/lens can help the teacher realize the 'why' behind the student's response/performance.

How can educators identify literacy skills and needs through observation of the student's use of familiar L1 and/or L2 words?

While a variety of resources exist to compare the phonologies and structures of languages, there are other ways to build in opportunities to observe and inquire, as suggested by Gottlieb (2023), these include:

- Creating routines and spaces that invite students to make and share connections related to language and print using both L1 and L2 as they prefer.
- Celebrating skills demonstrated via traditional probes, such as grammatical structures (e.g., word endings), phonemic awareness (e.g., blending/segmenting syllables, identifying initial sounds, letter-sound correspondence), and categorizing, regardless of which language the student uses to demonstrate these skills.
- Probing or inquiring about parallel skills in the L1 (e.g., pluralization of nouns) or probing by using more familiar English words.

How can educators consider all dimensions of the student biography and other factors that might be impacting perceived performance?

A student's biography includes aspects that we do not see within the instructional day. These home, community, and prior schooling factors are critical for understanding and connecting to students and families. It is imperative to use a wider, more critical and informed lens when considering possible factors/impacts upon a student's performance (Herrera, 2022). Consider how often we are surprised by the diverse array of connections that learners make to the same image, concept, prompt, etc.



Key Questions on Fundamental Aspects of Language Continued

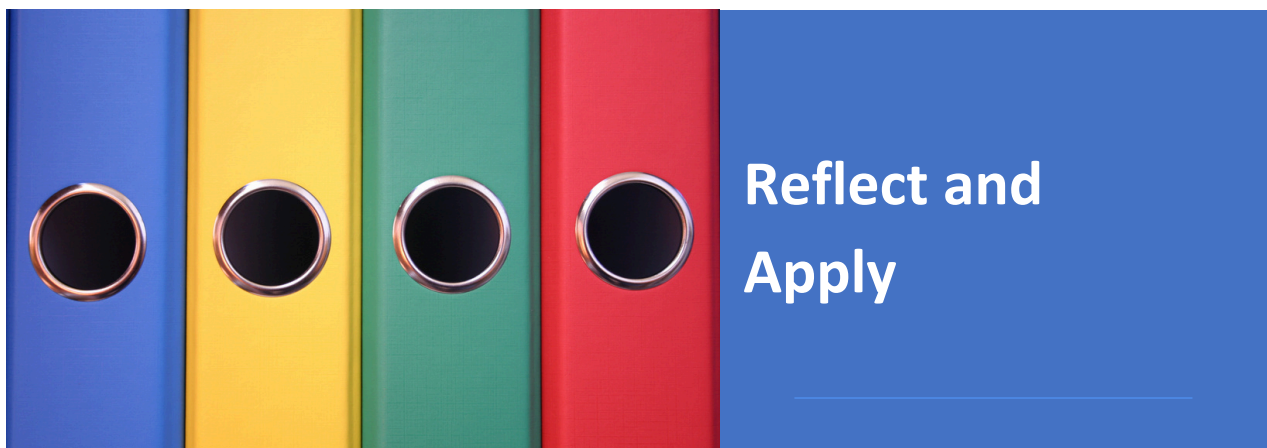
How well does the student learn new routines, chores, and expectations at home?

This question taps into the parents' potential value as a resource, since a parent is their child's first teacher. The home environment provides contextualized, relevant, and meaningful situations and scenarios which can provide an authentic look at the student's capacity to learn. If the same capacity is not demonstrated in the academic setting, educators may wish to work with parents to consider new ways to access the student's knowledge, allowing them to connect to the student's biography and move beyond the deficit perspective of thinking the student lacks abilities (Yamamoto & Sonnenschein, 2016).

How can educators partner with the parent(s)/family to build connections and/or make content relevant to students?

Partnering with parents and families goes beyond sending home newsletters, homework in the native language, and "get to know me" worksheets. Engaging in meaningful and intentional conversations with parents/families helps educators to understand, value, and affirm the rich material and resources they provide in the student's work towards literacy (Edwards, 2016).

Such partnership with families might include gathering information about the qualities of the L1, asking for common vocabulary surrounding a topic, or learning about the student's own experiences that can help relate to the instruction (Leo et al., 2019). For example, educators may send home 2–3 content-related images along with simple questions to prompt parents/families to share connections to their home and community experiences, language(s), and literacy practices. This information can inform instruction by creating relevancy and affirming the biography of each student.



Reflect and Apply

As educators plan and deliver reading instruction, the roadmap 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?



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