

Literacy Development of Emergent Multilingual Learners in the Early Childhood Classroom

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This brief focuses on the literacy development of Emergent Multilingual Learners (EMLs) in early childhood classrooms. It aims to guide administrators and educators in recognizing and leveraging the preliteracy assets that these children bring from their home languages and cultures, which may not be evident through standard screeners. The brief emphasizes the crucial role of oral language as the first foundation of literacy, the importance of respecting a child's first language and cultural background as integral to their learning, and refutes misconceptions about bilingualism. It also addresses the limitations of standard language screeners and assessments, advocating for a more holistic approach that includes parent partnerships and considers the child's language and culture. The brief concludes with research-based practices and recommendations for supporting literacy development in early childhood for multilingual learners, highlighting the need for culturally and linguistically responsive instruction and materials.

Questions for Collaborative Parent Engagement

1. What does a typical day look like for your child?
2. What is your child's style of play?
3. Do they interact with other children?
4. What books does your child like?
5. What would you like us to know about your child?



**Misconceptions
Regarding Bilingualism
& Second Language
Acquisition
in Very Young Children**

- “Young children pick up a second language very quickly”
- “More English is better”
- “Bilingualism confuses children”
- “Bilingualism leads to weak skills in both languages”

Bridges to Literacy

A child's first language (L1) is deeply tied to their identity and plays a vital role in how they make sense of the world. Despite common myths that bilingualism causes confusion or slows down learning, research consistently shows that supporting a child's L1 actually enhances their cognitive, academic, and social-emotional development and provides a strong foundation for learning English (L2). When schools overlook or diminish a child's L1, it can lead to the loss of cultural ties, disrupt family communication, and hinder academic growth. To truly support literacy development, educators must recognize families as essential partners who bring valuable insights into their children's strengths and needs. By building trusting, culturally responsive relationships with families, schools can create meaningful pathways that honor and integrate children's full linguistic and cultural identities into their literacy journey.

Research Based Practices for Early Childhood Literacy Instruction

- Adopt a comprehensive literacy approach for dual language learners that is grounded in research and theory in second language acquisition and biliteracy.
- Ensure that early childhood pre-literacy practices are developmentally appropriate and focused on the precursors to literacy, not on explicit reading skills.
- Follow a curriculum that is culturally responsive and linguistically appropriate.
- Utilize materials that reflect the languages and cultures of the students.
- Ensure access to books in both English and the home language.
- Differentiate based on the language proficiency levels.
- Value the home language and literacy practices as assets to be included in classroom instruction.

Limitations of the Standard Language Screeners and Assessments

Standard developmental screeners are often designed with monolingual, Western cultural norms in mind, which can lead to an inaccurate representation of Emergent Multilingual Learners' (EMLs) true abilities. When educators rely too heavily on these screeners without considering a child's linguistic and cultural background, students may be mistakenly labeled as "at risk" or inappropriately referred for special education services. To address this, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) has developed the Emergent Multilingual Learners (EML) Protocol, which provides educators with strategies for more accurate identification and support of multilingual learners. It emphasizes the importance of using multiple forms of assessment—such as observation, dynamic assessment, and input from families—to create a more complete and equitable understanding of a child's development and potential.

Reflect and Apply

- How can early childhood educators understand, acknowledge, and access the individual foundational literacy skills that the youngest students already bring with them to school?
- What parent partnerships exist in your setting?
- How can these partnerships be utilized?
- What can families add to guide instruction, screening, and evaluations that cannot be gathered from traditional screenings/evaluation tools?
- How can standard language screeners and assessments be used in non-discriminatory ways?
- What can you incorporate in your teaching practice to get a fuller picture of your students' ability to learn, beyond just using traditional data like test scores or grades?