

Learning About Multilingual Learners

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Big Idea

Multilingual learners are a diverse group with individual needs that can be addressed by understanding proficiency levels and students' complex personal and academic experiences while holding high expectations for students as they are developing proficiency and learning content.

Questions Educators Ask

- What are the characteristics of multilingual learners?
- What are the components of a successful system of support for multilingual learners?
- What role do teacher expectations play in the education of multilingual learners?
- What do you need to know about your multilingual learners as they develop language, literacy, and content knowledge?

We fled Afghanistan, leaving everything behind as we made our way to Pakistan. The 12-hour trip in the back of a truck took two days and nights. We climbed mountains, crawled through dirt caves, and hid from certain torture and death. With no food and little water, my mother, brother, and I reached Pakistan and wandered the streets for days. After many desperate months, my mother got a job that barely paid for our room. Although we went many nights without food, I had no time to focus on how bad my situation was because my priority was

to do well in school and learn Urdu. Education had become my refuge and, once again, my joy in life.

While living in Pakistan for 7 years, we faced many challenges and obstacles. I even stopped going to school because it got too hard to keep my grades up and to pay attention in my classes. I started working in order to support my family. Sometimes I used to see students coming from school. Tears fell from my eyes, and I used to say to myself how great it feels when you go to school and learn new things every day. I used to think that I would never return to school or become the person I had dreamed of.

Then, an amazing event changed my life. After an extensive interview and a home visit from a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees officials, my mother, my brother, and I were allowed to fly to America. A journey of two nights and three days placed us on American soil, in the city of Boise, Idaho.

The next morning was a true awakening. Slowly, the darkness that had stretched from the night of my father's and brother's deaths began to lighten, and I faced each new challenge eagerly. My biggest obstacle was learning English, so I worked hard in class, read more than my friends, listened to the news every night, and spoke English every chance I could. I got help from teachers and friends, who became my mentors and role models.

Now I see my life's path as a circle that I began to walk the day I arrived in America, when individuals opened their hearts to me, and opportunities—like open arms—embraced me. I will widen this circle as I reach out to others to make a difference in their lives.

—Arian Dyanat

Think of yourself so eager to have an education but not able to attend school. Imagine living in constant violence, destruction, and war where you lose one or more of your beloved family members. Your family is torn apart, running away to survive, and you are only twelve years old. Yes, it is hard to imagine, but I have lived through it all. Members of my family escaped Ethiopia's tyrannical regime, only to face more terror in Kenya as refugees. We never gave up hope for finding peace and freedom and, with determination, finally found a new home in the USA. I still carry my past with me; it is impossible to forget, and it has taught me valuable life lessons about positive leadership and the importance of building community. The obstacles I overcame have helped me develop determination and persistence in any challenge I now face.

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” I keep this quote in my mind as I keep my family in Africa in my heart. And I believe that my mind and heart will continue to guide me, just one individual, to make this world a better place.

—Abdurashid Ali

The journeys of these two extraordinary young people, in their own words, can teach us much about what is possible in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Their journeys can teach us much about ourselves as teachers and as learners in our own journey toward high standards and high achievement for all our students.

This journey begins with two steps—knowing our students and knowing where we are going. Effective teachers are in a constant cycle of assessing, planning, teaching, and reflecting. Knowing your students means knowing their language and literacy levels and their skill in writing. It also means knowing about their prior schooling, literacy in their primary language, and the circumstances of their arrival in this country. It means recognizing how the structures of their primary language and the worldview of their culture impact their comprehension, learning, and use of English. And it means knowing their strengths, assets, talents, passions, and interests.

For teachers of multilingual learners, knowing where you are going means having a clear definition of what it means to be proficient in a language, as well as knowledge of language, language learning, and language teaching. Let’s begin with knowing our students—who are our multilingual learners?

The Changing Face of Schools

The population of U.S. public school students learning English as an additional language has increased dramatically since the turn of this century. The National Center for Education Statistics reported in 2019 (the last year of reporting at the date of this publication) that the number of multilingual learners in grades K–12 had grown from 9.2 percent, or 4.5 million students in 2010, to 10.4 percent, or 5.1 million students. Multilingual learners in the United States hail from all over the world. The majority (75.9 percent) speak Spanish as a first language, and the second most common language in the fall of 2019 was Arabic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Twelve states now report that multilingual learners exceed 10 percent of their student population. California, Texas, New York, and Illinois have the largest numbers of students who are learning English as an additional

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language, but Alaska, Colorado, Delaware, Maryland, Nevada, New Mexico, Rhode Island, and Washington have joined the ranks of those educating a significant number of multilingual learners.

Sadly, the academic learning and linguistic progress of multilingual learners has remained problematic despite many efforts to improve student learning outcomes. Despite many initiatives designed to improve student outcomes, the achievement of multilingual learners is essentially flat. For example, the New York State Education Department reported in 2021 that the four-year graduation rate for multilingual learners was 61 percent compared to 91 percent for all other students (New York State Education Department, 2021). Many multilingual learners who enter the U.S. school system during adolescence believe there is no way for them to pass the tests required under state mandates. According to Child Trends (Murphy, 2014), at the national level, just under one-third of English language learner (ELL) students (31 percent) scored at the basic level or above in reading in fourth grade, compared with more than two-thirds (72 percent) of non-ELL students.

According to the U.S. Department of Education,

In grade 4, roughly the same number of states experienced increases as states that experienced decreases in the percentage of ELs [English learners] proficient in reading. Nine states experienced essentially no change from 2009 to 2017. Overall, the percentage of ELs proficient in reading rose by 3 percentage points in grade 4 (from 6 percent to 9 percent) and by 2 percentage points in grade 8 (from 3 percent to 5 percent). (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.)

Successful Systems for Multilingual Learners

Successful systems for multilingual learners do not leave support for learning to chance. For example, the World-class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) has articulated four “big ideas” foundational to serving learners well (WIDA, 2020, p. 17). These four big ideas are related to

- **EQUITY** of Opportunity and Access
- **COLLABORATION** Among Stakeholders
- **INTEGRATION** of Content and Language
- **FUNCTIONAL APPROACH** to Language Development

Let’s briefly explore each big idea in more detail.

Equity of Opportunity and Access

This first principle serves as a foundation for the others that follow. Opportunity to learn (OTL) was discussed by Coleman et al. (1966) and has since been expanded by others across several dimensions: instructional time, content or subject matter, and degree of complexity of skills and concepts. Systematic exposure to less-challenging curriculum results in depressed achievement: For so many topics, students simply can't learn what they haven't been taught.

Equity of opportunity works in tandem with access to high-quality curriculum and instruction. It isn't just about the ability to enroll in a course; it is a matter of what actually happens inside that classroom. A successful approach includes scaffolded language supports; it also involves the practice of translanguaging—encouraging students to use their full range of experiences and communication modes—instead of viewing English as the only path to learning (e.g., Lewis et al., 2012). Translanguaging does not require that the teacher can speak the same heritage language as the learner; instead, it advocates for teachers to move from a “monoglossic” belief to one that leverages multimodal approaches for text, visuals, and cultural knowledge to promote learning (García, 2020).

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Collaboration Among Stakeholders

The successful education of multilingual learners requires meaningful collaboration among professionals and the students' families. In terms of the professionals, this requires regular consultation among content teachers, language specialists, and school administrators (WIDA, 2020). But even these essential collaborations are diminished if families and the larger community are not seen as important resources. The ability to leverage students' assets will not be possible if teachers don't know what those assets are. And sharing the same language as the students does not mean that educators understand what the children bring socioculturally—or their identities. For decades, the field has understood the crucial function of funds of knowledge in positioning learning relationships between home and school (Moll et al., 1992).

Integration of Content and Language

The need to communicate permeates everything we do, not only in the classroom but also beyond its walls. Thus, teachers must ensure they have addressed the linguistic—not just the academic—demands of the content or task. In other words, we must analyze every lesson for the linguistic opportunities provided for students. Teachers, especially those who were not multilingual learners in school, need to be

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reminded that multilingual learners are doing double the work: They are tasked with learning content and language simultaneously (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

Functional Approach to Language Development

The function of communication determines the form that it takes. Halliday (1976) stated that the need for language, and therefore the motivator for developing it, lies in its function. He categorized these into four areas:

- **Instrumental**, as when expressing a need (“I want a drink of water”)
- **Regulatory**, as when telling someone else what to do (“Give me that”)
- **Interactional**, to engage in conversation and build relationships (“I like you”)
- **Personal**, to express feelings, opinions, and identity (“I am happy”)

These basic functions of language are transformed in school settings through speaking and writing. Folding the functions of the language needed in the classroom with the content illuminates the tools students need.

The Role of Expectations for Multilingual Learners

Teacher expectations play a significant role in the education of multilingual learners (Canillas, 2021; Pit-ten Cate & Glock, 2018; Rubie-Davies & Peterson, 2016; Stutzman & Lowenhaupt, 2022; S. Wang et al., 2018). Far too often, teachers hold their multilingual learners to lower standards, accept inferior work, and attribute students' proficiency levels and lack of achievement to students' demographics, including ethnicity and social class (Nora & Echevarria, 2016). This clearly contributes to the limited progress multilingual learners have made over the past several decades.

In fact, teacher expectations have an influence on students' learning. An effect size is a statistical tool for measuring the magnitude of an influence. Teacher expectations have been demonstrated to influence learning, with an effect size of 0.42 (www.visiblelearningmetax.com). In the words of Glass, an effect size not only addresses the question “does a treatment affect people”; it also reveals the answer to “how much does it affect them” (quoted in Kline, 2004, p. 95). There was a discussion of effect size in the introduction; remember that an effect size of 0.42 means that it holds the potential to accelerate learning.

And *potential* is the key term in that last sentence. Teacher expectations may be accurate, or they may be low due to biases. The further entanglement of language, ethnicity, race, and economic status results in some stark outcomes, and these biases, expressed as teacher expectations, influence what students are taught or not taught. A study of 150,000 classrooms examined the literacy experiences of those serving at least 20 percent of multilingual learners (TNTP, 2022). They found that one-third of the articles and paired texts assigned to students were below grade level. Notably, the study included years impacted by the pandemic, from 2018 to 2021. The authors stated, “Inequities in access to grade-level work that existed long before the pandemic have only deepened, and . . . most school systems are not yet implementing strategies that could put students on track to recover from the disruption of the last several years” (p. 2).

These lower expectations are often manifested in subtle ways, even as teachers themselves believe their expectations for their multilingual learners are just as high as those of their other students. Their intentions are admirable: they don’t want to embarrass the students by asking questions that require the expression of a complete thought, frustrate them by giving them a difficult assignment, or inhibit them by correcting errors. The outcome, however, is often that multilingual learners are not exposed to grade-level curriculum and are not held accountable for the same level of performance as native English speakers. Rubie-Davies’ (2014) work on teacher expectations reveals that those with lower expectations routinely accept an inferior standard of work. A simple exchange between a teacher and a student can hold the student to high standards or allow them to sit in silence and become a passive learner while the teacher turns to another student for the answer.

Teacher expectations extend to their expectations about their students’ families, too. Educators too often mistakenly underestimate the capacity of multilingual parents to help their children succeed in school. Wassell et al. (2017) investigated the expectations of middle school STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) teachers serving many multilingual learners. They found that although the teachers in the study acknowledged the importance of communication and professed empathy for the socioeconomic challenges and limited formal education faced by some families, they held to a narrow conception of what they termed “good parents” and “bad parents.” In the teachers’ description, “good parents” attended conferences and school events and helped with homework. “Bad parents” did not, and therefore those parents were assumed to not care about their child’s education. Even as the teachers acknowledged communication factors with families as a barrier, their practices and expectations contradicted their stated beliefs. In practice, they held the

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same expectations for family involvement in home-school communication and assistance with homework as they did for English-proficient families.

Parents of multilingual learners express both the willingness and the ability to support their children's learning (August & Shanahan, 2006). And the evidence is that parents' expectations and aspirations for their child hold an effect size of 0.70, meaning that they have considerable potential to accelerate student achievement (Hattie & Hattie, 2022; www.visiblelearningmetax.com). However, cross-cultural communication barriers can get in the way of parents effectively partnering with educators. A study focused on parents of children enrolled in an elementary dual language program revealed that many Spanish-speaking parents saw their involvement as crucial to their child's success but expressed concerns about communicating with the school, including a lack of personnel other than teachers in the dual language program who spoke Spanish. They found this to be an impediment to their child's success, noting "that their children would learn more knowing that [their families] are accepted and embraced by the school community" (Gerena, 2011, p. 359). In addition, they had questions about how their child's heritage language was being maintained, as they viewed this as critical to maintaining family relationships and communication at home. These concerns, it should be stated, are rarely addressed in educators' work with the families of multilingual children.

Knowing Our Students

Knowing our multilingual students as learners, of course, means that we know their proficiency levels in English and literacy skills and that we know what background knowledge, interests, passions, and lived experiences they bring to the specific content we are teaching. The adult-child relationship is a personal one that involves knowing about our students' lives, their families, and their backgrounds. Further, the effect size of student expectations is much larger than that for teachers and parents at 1.33. If multilanguage students believe they cannot learn and are not smart, this is a powerful impediment to their success. Ensuring multilingual students reach their potential is critical, as the educators' role is to help students exceed what they think is their potential. Knowledge about our students allows us to bridge the gap between school and the world where our students live, a world that often differs from the world of school. Knowing our students as children or as adolescents allows us to draw upon their funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), integrating what they already know and understand with grade-level content. It is evident that we must take the necessary steps to create a welcoming, caring, supportive learning environment for our

multilingual learners. Thankfully, there is evidence for what works and what doesn't, which can support us as we strive to help our multilingual students reach high levels of success.

There are some similarities between first- and second-language, or subsequent-language, learning. How do infants acquire their first language? They receive immense amounts of input from the people around them. They hear language over and over again, all day, for years. Likewise, they see many clues around them to help connect the words to actions, things, and ideas. No one minds if they make mistakes as they learn to speak. Caregivers often model the correct way to express a thought simply by restating it. Babies are rewarded with praise and encouragement for their efforts. They use language to communicate with others about their world all day. And there is always a real-life purpose for the communication.

With that in mind, second-language acquisition for school-aged children has some unique features that are worth attending to. These show the importance of teachers creating nurturing classroom cultures, as well as the importance of language, language, and more language:

1. **Comprehensible input:** Multilingual learners need to hear language that is comprehensible to them throughout the day (Krashen, 1986).
2. **Comprehensible output:** Multilingual learners need opportunities to communicate in the target language to encounter gaps, and then can repair those gaps to make their message understood by others (Swain, 1985).
3. **Interaction:** Multilingual learners need to use language with others for authentic purposes (Long, 1990).
4. **Low-anxiety environment:** Multilingual learners need to feel psychologically safe enough to make mistakes and take risks (Edmondson, 1999).

An important difference comes into play when additional language learning takes place in school, where individual attention is infrequent and grade-level content must be learned at the same time as language. In this situation, it becomes essential that we provide explicit, focused language instruction, along with scaffolds (support) to make content learning accessible to students who are still learning the language. In other words, systematic instruction in language acquisition is important, as are opportunities for students to use academic language to talk and write about academic concepts.

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To enact WIDA's principles of sound systems of support, the climate for learning, the clarity of the learning, and the cohesion of learning are always in play. The process of a system of supports begins with the identification and classification of a multilingual learner, and the remainder of this chapter is dedicated to those processes and procedures. Each of the Five Cs can and should be woven into the fabric of the initial assessment and classification process, a task that requires intentionality from our first contact with the multilingual student and their family.

Warning: Multilingual Learners Are Not a Monolithic Group

One of the most important things to recognize about teaching multilingual learners is that they are not a monolithic group. One of the best ways to describe multilingual learners is to acknowledge their diversity, as they differ in several important ways, including the following:

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- **Linguistic.** While Spanish is the second most common language in the United States, students in a given school district might speak more than one hundred different languages. These languages differ in their pronunciation patterns, orthographic representations, and histories, and thus in the ease with which students can transfer their prior knowledge about language to the process of learning English. The more different a student's primary language is from English, the greater the challenge in transferring their knowledge about language to English.
- **Proficiency in the home language.** Based on a number of factors, including age and prior education, students who speak the same language and are the same age may have very different levels of academic language proficiency in their home language. The development of a formal first language facilitates learning in additional languages. Some students are bilingual, meaning that they speak two languages, whereas others are biliterate, meaning that they read and write proficiently in both languages.
- **Generation.** There are recognized differences in language proficiency for students of different generations living in the United States. First and second generations of multilingual learners differ from each other in significant ways, including the ability to use English at home. Evidence on generation 1.5 students (protracted multilingual learners born within or outside the United States) suggests that these students attempt to straddle their old world and the new world in which they live, and thus they experience greater difficulty in developing English proficiency.

- **Number of languages spoken.** Some students enroll in U.S. schools having mastered more than one language already, so they may have previously gained linguistic flexibility that can aid them in learning additional languages. In contrast, others may have spoken one language at home for years, so their exposure to English is a new learning experience.
- **Motivation.** Often tied in with their migration, immigration, or birthplace, students differ in their motivation to learn English. Immigrant families leave their homelands for a variety of reasons, yet political and economic circumstances are perhaps the most common. Many students have left loved ones behind, along with a familiar and cherished way of life. For some, it is the dream and expectation that they will return to their country when a war is ended or when the family has enough money to better their lives in their home country. These students may not feel a great need to become proficient in a language they don't intend to use for very long.
- **Poverty.** Living in poverty and experiencing food insecurity has a profound impact on learning in general, and that extends to learning a language. Simply said, when poverty is addressed so that students' basic needs are met, they are more likely to excel in school.
- **Personality.** Some students are naturally outgoing and verbal; others are shy or prefer more independent activities. Some are risk takers who are not afraid to make mistakes; others want their utterances to be perfect. These personality differences can lead to differences in the rate at which students gain proficiency in listening and speaking or reading and writing.

Marking the Development of Multilingual Learners

Multilingual learners progress through stages as they reach increasing proficiency. Typically, proficiency starts with a silent phase in which the student does very little talking (Lai & Wang, 2016). We've all seen a student who seems reserved but is taking in everything. In all likelihood, if this student is an emergent multilingual learner, they are assimilating the sounds of English and learning basic vocabulary.

As an example, consider Sari, a wide-eyed and inquisitive student who emigrated from Cambodia and participated in her district's newcomer program. With support and a risk-free environment, Sari started talking in a matter of a few months, positioning herself well on her way to academic success and English proficiency. In this case, the respectful treatment of

her silent period, which gave her the time to become more comfortable with her early attempts, was critical for her language development.

As students like Sari develop language, they move through a continuum of increasing skill and understanding. California's proficiency levels identify three language proficiency levels that are used for instructional purposes: *emerging*, *expanding*, and *bridging*. Most states have developed sets of standards for proficiency levels or use those developed by WIDA (<https://wida.wisc.edu/resources/performance-definitions-expressive-domains>), though they may call them by other names. Figure 1.1 features a list of performance definitions used by California to describe each level.

FIGURE 1.1 California Performance Definitions for Three Levels of English Language Proficiency

English language learners can understand and use . . .	
Level 1 Emerging	Students at this level typically progress quickly, learn to use English for immediate needs, and begin to understand and use academic language for the grade level, with substantial language support provided.
Level 2 Expanding	Students at this level use their growing language skills in more advanced ways that are appropriate to their age and grade level, with moderate language support provided.
Level 3 Bridging	Students at this level can independently use a variety of high-level English language skills and fully participate in grade-level academic activities in all content areas, with light language support provided.

Source: Adapted from Sacramento County Office of Education (n.d.).

Conclusion

The reality is that multilingual learners must make significant progress each year to catch up to a moving target. Some students do not make that much progress, especially when teachers' expectations are low or there is faulty or infrequent communication with families. Educators must examine the learning conditions that are needed in the classroom to promote learning. As educators, we must remember that our students bring a wealth of background knowledge and experiences that can support learning new content in a new language, but they may need guidance in making those connections and drawing upon their prior knowledge. We can ensure that multilingual learners succeed by focusing on the classroom learning environment we create.