

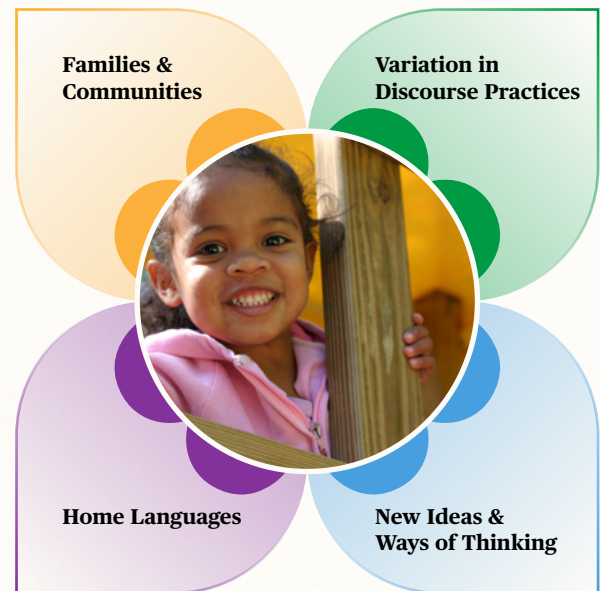


An Asset-Based Approach to Multilingual Learner Terminology

Why Do the Terms We Use Matter?

Multilingual learners bring a wealth of resources and perspectives to their schools and classrooms that can strengthen learning for all students. They bring linguistic and cultural knowledge from experiences in their families and communities, home languages, variation in discourse practices, and, in some cases, with schooling in other countries that affords opportunities for sharing new ideas and new ways of thinking.¹

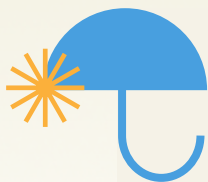
Foregrounding the term “multilingual learner” in education policy and practice signals an asset-based approach that helps to ensure students’ experiences are acknowledged, valued, and incorporated.



Who Are Multilingual Learners?

Multilingual learners are students participating in the PreK-12 education system whose home or ancestral language is a language other than English. Often, these home and ancestral languages can be suppressed or devalued, explicitly or implicitly, by national and local policies and institutions.²

Multilingual learner is a general term for a large and diverse group of students. Many of the terms used to identify multilingual learners in federal, state, and local policy and practice are based on the language instruction educational programs (LIEP) these students participate in and the accompanying services they receive. These terms are necessary for identification purposes to ensure that multilingual learners’ basic civil rights are upheld and that they are appropriately served in the U.S. public school system.³ Yet these terms often do not acknowledge the assets that multilingual learners bring, nor are they the terms with which multilingual learners or their families might themselves identify.



“Multilingual learner” is necessarily broad as it is an umbrella term that includes the many terms and labels used to identify linguistically minoritized students in US public schools. Some might argue that the term “multilingual learner” refers to any student who is learning another language, including English-speaking students who are enrolled in dual language education programs or world language classes. Others assert that this use of the term diminishes its meaning for linguistically minoritized students by glossing over their unique assets and strengths and by devaluing the richness of their linguistic repertoires.

Research shows how the terms used by school systems to identify some multilingual learners, such as “English Learner” or “long-term English Learner,” affect students’ and teachers’ perception of their abilities and potential—which, in turn, may affect students’ access to opportunities, and their academic achievement. Overall, these terms can at times conceal more than they reveal about multilingual learners.⁴



For students, these terms can carry a stigma that negatively impacts their engagement and motivation.⁵



For teachers, these terms can influence their assumptions about what multilingual learners are capable of and thus their expectations of students’ performance.⁶

Ideally, multilingual learners experience their schooling in ways that maximize their opportunities to draw on and nurture their unique resources and experiences—often called funds of knowledge⁷—while minimizing, or eliminating altogether, situations in which their strengths are overlooked or ignored.

Ensuring that asset-based approaches are taken up requires that both policymakers and practitioners understand the purposes for which different terms are used to identify and describe multilingual learners and their affordances and limitations across educational settings.

What Terms Do School Systems Use to Identify Multilingual Learners?

English Learner

(Previously “Limited English Proficient”)



A student aged 3 to 21 enrolled in elementary or secondary school who has been identified, based on their performance on a standardized English language proficiency assessment, as needing additional support to access and participate in instruction delivered in English.⁸

Example

This is the term used in the 2015 *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), the most recent iteration of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA), to refer to students who are legally entitled to language services that enable them to meaningfully participate in school programs and activities.⁹ Unless their families opt a student classified as an English Learner out of services, schools must provide a language assistance program.¹⁰ These programs range from bilingual and dual language education programs to sheltered instruction and English as a second language (ESL) programs.¹¹

Emergent Bilingual

Same definition as English Learner.

Example

This term was initially coined by researchers to reframe English Learners’ development of multiple languages as an asset.¹² In 2021, the Texas Education Agency adopted the term Emergent Bilingual to replace English Learner.¹³

Indigenous English Learner

An English Learner who is Native American, an Alaska Native, or a native resident of the outlying Islands and Territories, and comes from a home or community where a language other than English has had an impact on their level of English language proficiency.¹⁴



Example

The federal definition of English Learner, as amended under *ESSA*, includes explicit reference to this student population, thus distinguishing Indigenous English Learners from immigrant-origin English Learners, or those English Learners who were not born in the United States or whose home language is a language other than English.¹⁵ In Alaska, roughly one-quarter of Alaska Native kindergarten students were classified as English Learners.¹⁶ While some states differentiate Indigenous English Learners in their identification policies, others do not.¹⁷

Former English Learner

(Also “Reclassified Fluent English Proficient”)

A student who at one point was identified as an English Learner and has since met state and local education agency criteria for reclassification to fluent English proficient.

Example

This term is used in federal non-regulatory guidance¹⁸ and in state guidance documents when outlining reporting and monitoring requirements for English Learners who have been reclassified. Schools are not required to provide Former English Learners with specific language services, but they must monitor their progress for four years to ensure they were not reclassified too soon.¹⁹

Recently-Arrived English Learner

A student identified as an English Learner who has been enrolled in U.S. public schools for fewer than 12 months.²⁰



Example

This term is defined in *ESSA*, where three options are outlined for including these students in school-level accountability for content-area assessment results. Schools are required to collect data on these students, and they are entitled to the same programs as all other English Learners.²¹

Newcomer

A foreign-born student (and their family) who has recently arrived in the United States.²²

Example

This term is defined in the U.S. Department of Education Office of English Language Acquisition’s 2016 *Newcomer Toolkit* and is used by many state and local education agencies. Unlike Recently Arrived English Learners, there are no federal accountability requirements for Newcomers, and there is not a common length of time in US schools required for a student to be considered a Newcomer. Many but not all Newcomers are also identified as English Learners. Nonetheless, the term is often used by districts and schools to describe specialized programs for Newcomers who are English Learners. Newcomer programs typically have a dual focus on developing basic English skills and acclimating students to the U.S. school system.²³

Long-Term English Learner (LTEL)

An English Learner student who has been enrolled in a U.S. school for six years or more and has not been reclassified. These students may have had inadequate prior schooling experiences and they are usually struggling academically due to their limited literacy skills in English.²⁴



Example

This term is used in *ESSA*, which requires that schools report the number of Long-Term English Learners.²⁵ However, definitions vary across state and local education agencies, with some using five instead of six years as the timeframe for LTEL identification. Though the term helps to shine a light on an often-overlooked population,²⁶ it has been critiqued as perpetuating deficit views of English Learner students by not considering how contextual factors influence student progress.²⁷ As a group of English Learners, Long-Term English Learners are entitled to language services, though these services vary considerably across districts and schools.

Student with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE)

A student who is new to the U.S. school system and has had interrupted or limited schooling opportunities in their home country. They typically have limited backgrounds in reading and writing in their home language(s) and are below grade level in many academic areas. Students who have these characteristics could be refugees, migrant students, or any student who experienced limited or interrupted access to school for a variety of reasons, such as poverty, isolated geographic locales, limited transportation options, societal expectations for school attendance, a need to enter the workforce and contribute to the family income, natural disasters, war, or civil strife.²⁸



Example

Although this term is not federally defined, it is used in resources published by the U.S. Department of Education to describe a specific group of Newcomer Students.²⁹ As many as 25 states have definitions for SLIFE, and some have additional reporting requirements.³⁰ For example, the Minnesota Learning English for Academic Proficiency and Success (LEAPS) Act defines SLIFE as an English Learner with an interrupted formal education who meets three of the following five requirements:

1. Comes from a home where the language usually spoken is other than English, or who usually speaks a language other than English.
2. Enters school in the United States after grade 6.
3. Has at least two years less schooling than the English Learner's peers.
4. Functions at least two years below expected grade level in reading and mathematics.
5. May be preliterate in the English Learner's native language.

Minnesota local education agencies are required to identify SLIFE on an annual basis, and the Commissioner is required to report on their academic and linguistic growth. Some districts and schools offer SLIFE-specific programs that provide access to holistic, wrap-around services focused on academic preparation, foundational language and literacy, socioemotional well-being, and more.³¹

Dual Language Learner (DLL)

A child from birth to age five who is learning two or more languages at the same time or learning a second language while continuing to develop their first language.



Example

This term was defined in a policy statement by the Department of Health and Human Services³² and is used by the Office of Head Start and early childhood practitioners. The term acknowledges that very young children are still actively developing their home language(s) along with an additional language. Compared with the K-12 education system, the delivery of early childhood education, including preschool, is far more dispersed across multiple federal, state, and local agencies. Dual Language Learners who enter preschool often have lower language and early literacy scores relative to their English-only peers.³³ There are no federal programmatic requirements for preschool Dual Language Learners; however, the state of Illinois requires that any public preschool serving 20 or more Dual Language Learners who speak the same home language must offer a bilingual education program.³⁴

Heritage Language Learner

A student who is learning a non-English language from their family's country or culture of origin. These students have varying levels of proficiency in the heritage language and may or may not already be fluent in English. Many Heritage Language Learners identify as American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander. However, not all students with these ethnic identities are Heritage Language Learners, and some Heritage Language Learners come from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds.



Example

This term is not defined in federal or state policy and has been much debated in the field. It was originally used in the foreign-language teaching and research community to describe an individual “raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken.” The student may speak or merely understand the heritage language and be, to some degree, bilingual in English and the heritage language.”³⁵ This definition was later expanded to include: a) students with a strong cultural connection to a particular ethnolinguistic group, but may not speak or understand their language; and b) students who arrived to the US from another country after the age of 12 having developed some proficiency in their heritage language but no longer uses it frequently.³⁶ These students may participate in heritage language programs, which can range from full-day dual language education programs to community-based afterschool programs.³⁷

What Student Characteristics and Experiences Do These Terms Obscure?

The official terms used to identify multilingual learners in the PreK-12 public school system can obscure important student-level characteristics and experiences that are associated with differential opportunities and outcomes for multilingual learners. Understanding these characteristics and experiences and being responsive to the heterogeneity of the multilingual learner population is an important part of an asset-based approach. The characteristics below are not an exhaustive list. Further, multilingual learners' schooling experiences are shaped by multiple characteristics, and this intersectionality creates distinct dynamics and effects.



Linguistic Characteristics

Home Languages

Multilingual learners bring an array of home languages to their educational experiences.³⁸ For students classified as English Learners, their initial degree of proficiency in their home language or languages has been associated with differential timing to reclassification,³⁹ as has their initial English language proficiency.⁴⁰ Additionally, initial kindergarten English language proficiency has been found to be associated with differential rates of proficiency on the English language arts assessment in third grade.⁴¹



Ancestral Language(s)

For some multilingual learners, their ancestral language or languages may have shaped their English language use or English language proficiencies,⁴² and revitalizing that language may be a priority for some students and/or communities.⁴³ In addition to supporting language revitalization, bilingual programs focused on supporting Indigenous students' heritage or ancestral language development have been associated with higher academic performance.⁴⁴



Different Language Backgrounds

Students from different language backgrounds may have differential access to opportunities to develop bilingualism and biliteracy depending on the programs available in their community and the ways in which the programs are administered.⁴⁵

Translanguaging Practices

Multilingual learners often engage in translanguaging practices to make sense of and communicate their learning. Translanguaging is a theory that explains the dynamic way people use language in real life to communicate as appropriate for the cultural and social context. Translanguaging practices might include students using more than one language interchangeably in classroom conversations, or students reading, listening, or watching something in one language and summarizing or interpreting it in another language.⁴⁶ These practices tend to be overlooked in schools and classrooms, where languages are frequently taught in isolation, and language development is measured based on monolingual norms that do not reflect multilingual learners' complex linguistic practices.



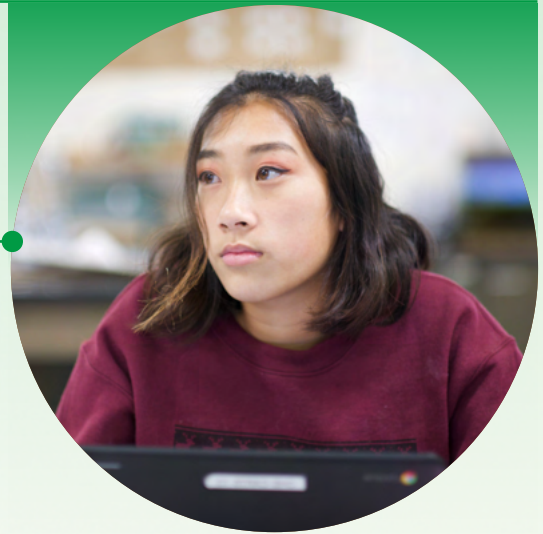
Demographic Characteristics

Gender

For multilingual learners who are classified as English Learners, gender has been associated with differential timing to reclassification out of EL status in some studies⁴⁷ while others find no difference.⁴⁸

Race

The intersection of race and language has implications for multilingual learners' opportunities in schools.⁴⁹ Many multilingual learners experience discrimination and institutionalized racism in their educational experiences, which can shape their opportunities, outcomes, linguistic identities, and sense of well-being.⁵⁰



Economic Well-Being

Multilingual learners' economic well-being has been associated with differential rates of second language development.⁵¹

Age & Immigration Experiences

For foreign-born multilingual learners, the age at which they came to the United States can shape their language and academic development,⁵² and their immigration experiences can influence their sense of safety and well-being.⁵³

Geographic Location

Multilingual learners' geographic location in the United States plays an important role in their schooling experiences. Not only do policies pertaining to language of instruction⁵⁴ and teacher certification⁵⁵ vary widely across states, but the local context (e.g., district size, urbanicity, and/or existing infrastructure to serve multilingual learners) shapes the resources and programs that are available to students.⁵⁶



Programmatic Experiences

(Not Specific to Language)

Gifted & Talented Programs

Multilingual learners tend to be underrepresented in gifted and talented programs,⁵⁷ potentially tied to inappropriate assessments, teacher bias, and insufficient support and infrastructure for ensuring gifted and talented programs are designed to be accessible to multilingual learners.⁵⁸



Migrant

Some multilingual learners are also migrant students who accompany parents and families as they relocate for seasonal or temporary employment in agriculture or fishing. Migrant education services vary considerably across state and local education agencies. Frequent moves and lost instructional time are some possible challenges that multilingual learners who are also migrant students may face.⁵⁹



Disability & Special Education Services

Multilingual learners with a disability and/or who are identified for special education services may face unique structural challenges or barriers in their education. There is some evidence that current special education identification processes may not be appropriate for all multilingual learners.⁶⁰ Reflecting the challenges educators encounter as they try to disentangle language development processes from learning difficulties, there is also evidence that English learner students may be under-identified for special education services in early grades, while many Long-Term English Learners at the secondary level are dually identified as having a disability.⁶¹



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