

# Centering Multilingual Learners in Early Literacy Instruction

Classroom-based strategies for ensuring multilingual learners develop foundational skills and have exceptional experiences becoming readers

## Background

In early 2020, we began an investigation into the research and practice of foundational literacy education to identify the most critical elements of high-quality, effective early literacy instruction and systems. We then explored the literature and research through the lens of centering multilingual learners (MLs).<sup>1</sup> We combed the research, devoting thought and attention to a thorough analysis of the structures and practices that need to be in place at the instructional and system levels to be sure early literacy instruction moves MLs through the continuum of skills that they need to acquire to be proficient readers.

**The result:** A suggested set of **five essential practices** for building an effective early literacy system that centers MLs, along with resources for observing, coaching, and reflecting on the current state of K–2 literacy instruction.

The instructional strategies below are designed to support educators working to accelerate MLs as they progress towards reading proficiency and offer classroom-based examples that show how each strategy comes to life when working with students.<sup>2</sup> Teachers can reference these strategies and examples while internalizing units and planning lessons then tailor them based on individual student needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Instruction Partners intentionally uses the term “multilingual learners” to acknowledge students developing proficiency in a new language while honoring their skills and competencies in their current language(s) and to support the needs of students who speak dialects and variations of English not represented in academic standards and materials.

<sup>2</sup> See the references section at the end of this document for details on the research and literature that informed these strategies.



The strategies are designed to work well **in both whole-class and small-group settings**, and can be applied in classrooms with MLs at a **variety of English proficiency and literacy levels and language groups**.<sup>3</sup> The strategies may also support students not identified as MLs who also need additional language and literacy support.

## Strategies and examples

### Strategy 1: Use bridging and connection strategies to **honor MLs' primary languages** and prior knowledge.

Note: Students at the beginning of their journey learning English will need more connections than students further along the path. As students progress and build their English vocabulary and comprehension skills, teachers still provide connections as a way to affirm and represent MLs' identities in the classroom.

This might look like . . .	Examples
Sharing sounds or words from the students' primary language to help them make a connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When learning or practicing the initial /h/ sound, tell Spanish-speaking students that they probably have heard the /h/ sound in “juego” (“I play”). Point out that the sound is represented by different letters in the two languages: “j” in Spanish and “h” in English.</li><li>• When learning/practicing the long /e/ sound, tell Spanish-speaking students that they probably have heard the sound in “isla” (“island”). Point out that the sound is represented by different letters and/or letter patterns in the two languages: “i” in Spanish and “ee,” “ea,” or “e_e” in English (present the pattern that has been previously taught or is the focus of current foundational skill lesson in English). Extend by sharing some of those words with their meanings so the students can begin to relate to those.</li></ul>

<sup>3</sup> There is substantial diversity in the ML population. Instruction Partners uses the term “multilingual learner” to include students who regularly interact in and with multiple languages, language dialects and varieties, as well as academic English. Because the overwhelming majority of multilingual learners (federally identified as English Learners) served in U.S. schools identify as Spanish speakers, the examples are based on working with Spanish-speaking students.



<p>Asking students to share words in their respective languages that have the same sound, then repeating the word and emphasizing the sound</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● When learning the /m/ sound, ask students what words in their languages have the same sound. Provide an example to prompt students: “manzana” for apple.</li></ul>
<p>Using resources such as <b>Language Transfers: The Interactions between English and Students’ Primary Languages</b> to learn about the sounds, written representations of the sounds, and other linguistic components of that language</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● When preparing a unit and lesson(s) to introduce and practice the sound /f/, look at the chart in the resource noted in the left-hand column to see if that sound exists in the student’s language.</li><li>● Use a resource such as <b>MyLanguages.org</b>. After clicking on a specific language (e.g., Spanish) select the “Alphabet” tab and 1) see the letters, English sounds, and pronunciation examples and/or 2) hear the sounds of the language. Additionally, use the other tabs on the language page to see common words from the language with images and the written words in the selected language and English.</li><li>● If a sound and/or sound pattern does exist, search for resources that include pictures to represent words with that sound in the student’s language (e.g., “fruta” [“fruit”] in <b>Spanish alphabet books and/or cards</b>, which may also be available as part of a curriculum or program’s set of materials).<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Ask students to say the name of what is pictured in their language. Then, repeat and emphasize that sound.</li><li>○ For the pronunciation of the word with the focus sound in the student’s language, enter the name of the item in the picture (e.g., “fruit” pictured for /f/) into an application or site such as <b>Spanishdict.com</b>, that translates and pronounces those words.</li><li>○ If a sound exists in both languages but the written form is not the same, provide additional writing practice with forming the new letter.</li></ul></li><li>● If a sound doesn’t exist in a student’s home language, see Strategy #3 below.</li></ul>
<p>Using flexible assessment practices that take into account students' primary language influence</p>	<p>During assessment, if student responses do not match the precise pronunciation, ask additional questions to determine if the student comprehends and give credit if the student demonstrates comprehension. For example, when a Spanish speaker replaces a /v/ sound with a /b/ sound on its own or in words like “van” or “vase,” ask the student to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ “sky draw” or use motion to represent the word</li><li>○ describe the item in another way or use it in a sentence</li></ul>



- point to the letter or picture representing the word
- listen to the sounds articulated from the teacher and indicate which one they were trying to articulate themselves

**Strategy 2: Integrate multimodal supports (e.g., peer interactions, visuals, movements) to focus on the development of oral language skills and vocabulary to help students make meaning of words.**

Note: This work can take place both when using decodable texts and grade-level or above grade-level complex texts (e.g., read aloud texts). Added visuals are intended to develop or reinforce vocabulary and not to provide clues to help students arrive at an answer.

This might look like . . .	Examples
Asking open-ended questions that students discuss with peers; prompting children to make personal connections and/or predictions, retell narratives, compare stories, share their ideas about and reactions to texts, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Before reading a text, use a picture-walk strategy to guide students making predictions about the text: “What do you think will happen?”; “What do you think this story will be about?”; or “What do you notice?” In efforts to keep the text at the center of the reading experience, these predictions should be confirmed or revised as the text unfolds.</li><li>● During reading or a read-aloud, ask students to reflect on a way they connect to the character: “How are you like this character?” or “Can you tell a partner about a time you also felt ___?”</li><li>● After reading, ask students about the theme, main ideas, or details or for their personal reactions and reflections: “What do you think the author wanted us to learn from this text?”; “Which was your favorite part?”; or “What else do you want to know about the characters/topic?”</li></ul>
Including visual supports and/or movements to introduce or reinforce vocabulary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● During a read aloud, strategically point out images in the illustrations to introduce or reinforce vocabulary. Ask students to repeat the new words.</li><li>● During a read aloud, use motions or actions to introduce or reinforce vocabulary. Ask students to repeat the new words with the motions or actions.</li></ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● If the curriculum calls for out-of-context practice (e.g., word sorts) add images to accompany the words to reinforce the meaning of the groups of letters/words that they are learning.</li><li>● When introducing words that start with the /p/ sound in English, show images or real-life objects of a pen, pencil, paper, etc. Ask students to repeat the new words.</li><li>● When introducing words that start with the /h/ sound in English, use a motion to represent the word (e.g., wiggling a hand, circling a finger/hand around your head, hopping). Ask students to repeat the new words.</li></ul>
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**Strategy 3: Provide additional, targeted support for newly taught sounds or sound patterns not in the students' primary languages.**

This might look like . . .	Examples
Explicitly modeling precise and accurate pronunciation and articulation of sounds or sound patterns and reinforcing accurate practice	Consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● showing mouth and tongue position for short vowels (giving students a mirror to practice the new sound while watching their mouth position)</li><li>● providing explicit voicing practice with hands on throats for /s/ versus /z/</li></ul>
During small-group time, providing extra practice opportunities on those sounds or sounds patterns identified as different from the student's primary language, knowing that precision from students will occur over time	Provide guided practice with <b>minimal pairs</b> to help students differentiate sounds they don't have in their language from ones they do have that may sound similar. For example, words with the /i/ and /ee/ sounds: "ship" and "sheep" or "sit" and "seat" will take more practice as students learn to hear and pronounce the new short /i/ sound and differentiate it from the familiar /ee/ sound.
Leveraging opportunities throughout the learning day to reinforce new sounds or sounds patterns	When sounds or sound patterns surface in conversation or within a text, call attention to the word and ask the student(s) to decode and/or orally repeat as appropriate.



## Strategy 4: Explicitly and systematically teach foundational skills **in-context** to the greatest extent possible.

Note: Like all students, MLs benefit from high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) that include a systematic foundational skills curriculum that includes explicit skill instruction and practice opportunities both in and out of context. However, it is imperative that MLs have many opportunities to practice the targeted skill in context as referenced in the “this might look like” section below.

This might look like . . .	Examples
<p>Creating time for students to practice the focus sounds and/or letter patterns when listening to and/or participating in chants, songs, poetry, read-aloud texts, formal and informal conversations, etc. To the extent possible, teachers should intentionally select practice elements that reflect the students’ identities and interests and that maintain the rigor of grade-level reading expectations</p>	<p>Tell students they will be listening for the focus sound they have been learning or reviewing. Then, explicitly emphasize that sound while presenting the text orally. Finally, ask the students to indicate when they hear the sound (e.g., by repeating the sound and word, raising their hands, writing it on a whiteboard).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 1st-grade example: “Today we learned about the short /a/ sound. First, I will read the poem to you as you listen and enjoy. The second time I read the poem, raise your hand every time you hear the short /a/ sound at the beginning of a word.”</li><li>• 2nd-grade example: “Today when you were talking about your mother, I noticed that you pronounced the word ‘mudder.’ Let’s look at this poem together to learn about the /th/ sound to help improve your pronunciation of the word in English. The sound is /th/. Notice that to make the /th/ sound, I put my tongue between my teeth and blow air out of my mouth. Also this /th/ is buzzed, or voiced. You try. Did you feel that buzz in your throat? Now I’ll read the poem. The first time, follow along as I read the poem to you. The second time, every time you see/hear a word with the /th/ sound raise your hand and make the sound /th/.”</li></ul>
<p>Asking students to read decodable texts that contain sound-spelling patterns as well as tricky words or sight words that have been explicitly taught. To the extent possible, teachers intentionally select decodable texts that reflect students’ identities and interests</p>	<p>When introducing the topic/text, tell students that they will be practicing using the sounds/sound patterns they have been taught to read the book together. During reading, ask students to point out the letter/letter pattern of focus.</p>



When reading and listening for content learning within grade-level texts, emphasizing the sounds and skills currently being taught or the sounds and skills that students need more support to master

While doing a read-aloud on a text about animal habitats, ask students to point out instances of the short vowels. Model identifying the short vowels if needed. Depending on the needs of the students, use the same strategies used during explicit foundational skills instruction (e.g., repeating the sounds, practicing precise articulation and mouth position, circling the vowels and stating the rules for identifying short vowels in words).

## References

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