INSTRUCTION PARTNERS

Common misconceptions about teaching multilingual learners to read (and how they keep students from meeting their potential).

By: Dr. Jessica Costa; Instruction Partners team

Imagine you're the coach of a lacrosse team. And imagine a group of kids who grew up playing soccer joined your team.

You probably wouldn't drop the new players into the middle of a veteran players' practice and expect them to figure out how to play on their own. You'd certainly want them to practice alongside their new teammates so they could see the game in action and form bonds with the other players, but you'd also recognize that they would need additional supports to master the new sport: they'd need to hear the rules and strategies explained, learn the vocabulary for equipment and skills, see throwing and catching the ball modeled, complete additional drills to master skills, and get feedback on their development from you (their coach) to make adjustments. You'd know that you could teach new techniques to the whole team in multiple ways so both veterans and novices felt supported. You'd probably also recognize that—though some of their discrete skills might be different—the athleticism and experience new players brought from playing soccer would likely be a huge asset to their development as lacrosse players.

Now, imagine you're a K–2 teacher. And imagine a group of kids who grew up hearing and speaking a language other than English joined your classroom.

In much the same way as athletes transitioning their skills to a new sport, multilingual learners (MLs) learning to read, write, and speak English need high-quality instruction alongside their monolingual English-speaking peers, ***and*** they also need different access points and supports that are responsive to their primary language skills. In other words, the science of reading instruction requires augmentation for MLs.

Most educators recognize that MLs need additional supports. The trouble is, K–2 educators aren't typically taught the differences between primary and additional language development, so they often don't know exactly what those supports are or the best way to deliver them. **The lack of training on what MLs need results in widespread misconceptions that can keep MLs from realizing their full potential in school.**

We believe a reconsideration of these misconceptions and what we can do in grades K–2 to combat them is long overdue.

Misconception #1: MLs must demonstrate grade-level English proficiency before they can handle grade-level content.

See the US Department of Education's Newcomer Tool Kit *(Chapter 3, page 9) for additional information and a different take on this misconception.*

We know that Tier 1 instruction is the best way to accelerate learning and that lack of access to it can have devastating consequences on students' long-term academic performance. We also know that many educators believe that it is appropriate to give MLs who have limited English proficiency less challenging work than their monolingual English-speaking peers.

In practice, this pervasive educator belief can mean that schools and systems often use practices that deny MLs access to grade-level work (e.g., pull-out supports that may not provide sufficient context for the knowledge or skills they're asked to master, small-group activities in which MLs are grouped together and receive less rigorous instruction than their monolingual peers). Such a system makes it all too easy for MLs to miss foundational content that lays the groundwork for knowledge and skills they'll be asked to master later in the year or in subsequent grades, putting them at risk of being perpetually behind.

Though it is true that MLs in K–2 often don't display the same English proficiency or English-language development patterns as their monolingual peers, that doesn't mean that they are any less capable of mastering grade-level content—if their teachers and administrators understand their linguistic development journey and are able to scaffold the right supports at the right time.

Escamilla, Olsen, and Slavick explain that bilingual brains process language differently than monolingual brains:

> "Second language development is decidedly dissimilar to the development of a first language precisely because it occurs on the bedrock of the first. It is in relationship and comparison to knowledge of the first language that the elements of a new language (such as vocabulary, phonological components, grammatical structures, and writing systems) are learned, and the understanding of the different language systems develops" (p.7).

The neurological differences between primary language and additional language development are precisely why teachers must not expect that foundational skills in English will develop for MLs in the same way as they will for monolingual students. In other words, **the science of learning to read just isn't the same for MLs** (Escamilla, Olsen, and Slavick).

We can work toward language proficiency and content mastery at the same time.

See the US Department of Education's Newcomer Tool Kit *(Chapter 3, page 5–7) for additional information.*

Rather than giving MLs remedial work because their learning trajectory differs from that of monolingual students, we can make sure that classroom teachers know that MLs need specific, intentional opportunities to make connections between their language(s) and English—like

prompting a player to notice what is the same and different about footwork in lacrosse and footwork in soccer. Prompting students to recognize where they can directly employ a skill they've already learned, where they need to modify a skill they've already learned, and where they need to learn a brand new skill can help them understand where to focus their efforts. It can also help teachers understand what kind of support is most appropriate for students to reach language proficiency and content mastery.

For example, the /j/ sound (as it sounds in "jet" and "page") doesn't exist in Spanish at all but is approximate in Vietnamese. Students whose primary language is Spanish would have to learn how to shape their mouth muscles to make an entirely new sound, but students whose primary language is Vietnamese would only have to adjust how their mouth muscles are used to pronouncing a similar sound. In this example, a teacher would likely have to support a Spanish-speaking student quite a bit more than a Vietnamese-speaking student—and, in turn, support a Vietnamese-speaking student more than a monolingual English-speaking student. However, nothing about varying degrees of pronunciation support precludes any of these students from accessing the same paragraph about a "/j/et" pilot as a part of the day's Tier 1 literacy lesson.

Differing needs doesn't necessarily mean putting students into different classrooms for different types of instruction.* *Sheltered instruction* is a strategy that can help all students access Tier 1 instruction. Sheltering could look like relatively simple instructional moves such as:

- enabling students to discuss a prompt in small groups using their preferred language;
- making connections between students' conversations and the topic at hand;
- sharing new "academic" ways (e.g., vocabulary, sentence structures) to discuss the topic; and
- providing opportunities for students to interact with each other and the content in multiple languages to make meaning of what they're learning while reinforcing language objectives as needed (see Hansen-Thomas, p. 166 for more).

It could look like ensuring phonics instruction includes teaching students the meanings of the words they're sounding out and helping students understand those words in a larger context (e.g., asking students to use a new word in a sentence describing a familiar topic) so MLs connect sounds to what they represent. When educators know more about the particular languages in their classroom, they can promote *cross-linguistic transfer* (i.e., helping students make linguistic connections between their primary language and the language they're learning).

We know that high-challenge and high-support environments often result in the most meaningful learning for students. By sheltering instruction, teachers can scaffold up (high support) to rigorous, grade-level knowledge and skills *in English* (high challenge).

At this point, if you're thinking, "Gee, sheltered instruction sure sounds a lot like typical, high-quality instruction," you're right! Sheltered instruction is all about ensuring that MLs have opportunities to use all of their linguistic, cultural, and knowledge-based resources to master the content the class is learning (Hansen-Thomas, 2008, p. 167). Sheltered instruction works because it engages MLs in an English-speaking academic community while providing them the tools they need to participate in that community and honoring the skills and assets they bring to it.

Misconception #2: Only ELD teachers are equipped to instruct MLs.

However inadvertently, our education system all too often perpetuates the belief that providing responsive instruction to MLs is the sole responsibility of English language development (ELD) teachers (e.g., inadequately or inconsistently preparing classroom teachers to serve MLs and build cross-cultural relationships in their teacher prep programs or professional learning).

Though ELD teachers and their specialized training play a critical role in MLs' schooling (*US Department of Education's* Newcomer Tool Kit, *Chapter 3, page* 10), mainstream classroom teachers play just as critical a role in building on MLs' cultural assets to develop their confidence as multilingual readers, writers, and communicators who contribute valuable ideas and skills to their core classrooms.

Students'—and all peoples'—experiences and selves can't be separated from their languages. Language governs many of the sounds, idioms, and conventions that we understand; it informs the cultural artifacts we're exposed to (e.g., music, movies) and how we consume them (e.g., auditorily, with a transcript); it filters the very way we see the world from the way we perceive time and space, to the colors our brains recognize, to what we remember and forget about events. It's inextricably tied to our cultures and ourselves.

When educators don't make space for languages other than English in their core classrooms (e.g., consistently removing MLs from their classrooms for remedial instruction, English-only policies), it can have the unintended effect of communicating to MLs that they don't belong in the classroom—at least not fully—which can affect students' beliefs in their own academic abilities.

Mainstream classrooms teachers can use small strategies to make a big difference.

By virtue of the heterogeneous nature of their classrooms, mainstream classroom teachers have the ability to provide MLs opportunities to develop authentic linguistic and social connections that facilitate their new language development. Exposure to the way their peers use English to talk to each other and make meaning of academic content is critical—especially for students with inconsistent exposure to English outside of school—to build an authentic vocabulary and fluency with a variety of language structures.

When teachers see students' primary language as an asset and communicate that to the class, not only do students make connections to and learn new language faster, they feel more valued because their language—this fundamental part of who they are, how they learn, and how they understand the world—is seen, recognized, and included.

In the classroom, teachers can communicate that they view primary language as an asset by introducing and reinforcing the idea that multilingualism is a superpower—an incredible asset that gives MLs different lenses to see the world—and discussing how great it is that their classroom is full of students with rich, diverse language skills and experiences. It could look like a teacher looking up a word with a target sound in a student's primary language and sharing a picture of that word to

practice the target sound (e.g., sharing a picture of a cat, for gato, to reinforce the /g/ sound). Such an example gives multilingual students the chance to demonstrate that they already have the target sound skill, feature their knowledge of their primary language in class, and have that knowledge affirmed by their teacher.

It could also look like offering students the chance to share personal connections in response to a story. For example, when reading a book about a child eating a holiday meal, the teacher could ask students to share their own holiday meal traditions. This gives students a chance to share their cultures on (and with) their own terms and encourages all students in the class to become more globally minded by introducing them to other cultural and familial traditions.

Showing our students that we respect their languages is an integral part of showing our students that we respect *them,* which can go a long way toward encouraging their participation in the classroom community.

Reconceiving early literacy instruction for MLs (and all students)

The attention that the science of reading is getting right now has the potential to be a game-changer for the way we teach children to read in the United States. But the complicated connections between language, culture, and individuals make it critical that we not oversimplify that science into a universal prescription for all students. Escamilla, Olsen, and Slavick warn:

> "a renewed concern about early literacy and a drive to get all children reading at grade level by third grade is tempting many states to limit what should be robust and informed literacy instruction to an uninspired narrow focus on a few foundational reading skills. We believe that is dangerous. **Understanding the relationship between receptive and productive language and between reading, writing, and oracy is falling away. The knowledge about the key role of meaning-making and comprehension and engagement/motivation threatens to be lost. And, absolutely key for EL/EBs [English learners/emergent bilinguals], is the tendency to ignore the specific knowledge base about dual language development and the importance of socio-cultural factors**" (p.13).

Research tells us that students need a *comprehensive approach* to early literacy instruction. Such an **approach to language learning would better serve not only MLs but all students.**

All students—regardless of how many languages they use—are language learners, and all language learners can benefit from strategies that promote holistic literacy and language development (e.g., the use of language and concepts that they already know to learn new information, connections to their cultural backgrounds and everyday lives). In other words, though MLs may need some supports specific to learning an additional language (e.g., linguistic connections between their primary language and English), many of the supports we know MLs need can actually benefit all students in language and content mastery (Escamilla, Olsen, and Slavick).**

That's why we designed our Early Literacy Playbook to be responsive to the strengths and needs of MLs alongside their monolingual peers. The playbook is designed to be used by school and system leaders to ensure that all teachers have the tools and skills they need to improve Tier 1 instruction,

including targeted resources that guide leaders through how to coach teachers to build on their students' linguistic and cultural assets. It outlines specific, step-by-step actions—not just general suggestions and best practices—that leaders can take to build quality early literacy practices throughout their school or system. Our hope is that this integrated approach can help leaders create systems that empower their educators to provide linguistically and culturally responsive instruction to MLs—and all learners—while ensuring every student receives the Tier 1 whole-class and small-group experiences they need to become proficient readers by the end of 2nd grade.

Learn more about the playbook here.

---

*There are reasons districts may choose to provide MLs with instruction outside of a core classroom. For instance, when a district has a large population of students new to the United States with beginning levels of English proficiency, they may provide a "newcomer center"—one of the federally approved Language Assistance Programs—for about a year. These programs seek to provide students with academic as well as social-emotional support and development; orientation to a new country, language, and school norms; and language and literacy development to support a successful transition into Tier 1, mainstream classroom settings. The US Department of Education notes that newcomer programs are short term, typically lasting no longer than one year, and should strive to minimize segregation (US Department of Education's *Newcomer Tool Kit*, Chapter 3).

**Though we believe the research base provides support for the themes discussed in this piece, we, of course, recognize that there is no such thing as guidance that will be right for every student, every time. All students, whether they're MLs or monolingual English-speaking learners, are individuals who may need something different—or even outright contradictory to—what high-quality research indicates is best practice and/or generally true.

The resources linked to on this page provide valuable context about MLs and best practices for their education; however, Instruction Partners does not necessarily endorse all of the language and information in these sources.