



# Reading Development and Multilingual Learners: Research-Based Guideposts for Equitable Literacy Instruction

## What do diverse multilingual learners need for their reading and literacy development?

This is a question that researchers and educators often ask as they look for ways to provide equitable and robust literacy instruction for multilingual learners. The process of learning to read works in a similar way, whether one is learning to read in their first or subsequent languages (Goldenberg, 2020); however, there are important considerations when designing literacy instruction for multilingual learners that often are not reflected in curriculum and instruction designed for monolingual students. Here, we offer a brief synthesis of research around five essential components of equitable literacy instruction for multilingual learners across grade levels and subject areas.



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## Building on students' cultural and linguistic assets

- All students gain important cultural and linguistic knowledge and resources by participating in the valued practices of their families and communities. As reading is a social and cultural activity, it is important for educators to understand, learn from, and build on multilingual learners' histories of participation in the language and literacy practices of their homes, schools, and communities (Souto-Manning, 2016; Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016; Gutierrez et al., 2009; Lee, 2007; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003).
- A reader's knowledge of and experience with the content or topic of reading plays a key role in reading comprehension, sometimes outweighing reading ability (Recht & Leslie, 1988). Prior knowledge activation benefits students' reading comprehension at all phases of the reading process –before, during, and after reading (Hattan et al., 2023).
- Deficit-based assumptions and perspectives about what students know and can do, or a lack of awareness and understanding about students' cultural and linguistic assets, including their home languages and literacies, can limit educators' ability to draw attention to and leverage students' prior knowledge as a resource for learning (Hattan & Lupo, 2020; Ballenger, 2019; Martinez et al., 2017; Moll, 2014; Lee, 2007).

## Developing oral language comprehension

- Spoken language is the basis for written language (for hearing students). In learning to read, students learn how sounds are mapped to print (Seidenberg & Cooper Borkenhagen, 2020). Children learn key skills such as phonological awareness through meaningful experiences with language, such as



interacting with others. Through playing with language (with rhymes, songs, and talking with others), children also learn that words are made up of individual sounds (phonemic awareness) that can eventually be mapped to letters and decoded (and encoded) as words (Goswami, 2020).

- Children/students need ample interaction with others to build a basis of any (spoken or signed) language to support the learning of the initial, foundational skills of reading (Burkins & Yates, 2021). Older students also need continued, extensive verbal interaction, so they can continue honing their skills while also transferring their current abilities as they read new words and comprehend increasingly challenging text (Burkins & Yates, 2021; Goldenberg, 2020).
- Practices such as translanguaging enable multilingual learners to use all of their linguistic resources to develop oral language skills and to support the development of academic literacies (Noguérón-Liu, 2020).
- For multilingual learners in the upper grades who are learning to read in English, contextual factors such as immigration, level of literacy in the first language (Jared, 2014) and level of school-based background knowledge (Lesaux & Kiefer, 2010) can influence literacy development (Harper & DeJong, 2004). Continuing to build oral language skills is crucial for leveraging and supporting their development in reading comprehension as students encounter increasingly complex texts (Lesaux, 2006; Burkins & Yates, 2022).



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## Expanding and strengthening vocabulary, word knowledge, and word recognition

- Word knowledge is an overarching concept that refers to the ability to read, recognize, and know how to use words. Regardless of the language a child speaks (or signs), words are learned implicitly through immersion in a language-rich environment (Lee et al., 2020).
- There are many facets of word knowledge, such as understanding the component parts of the word (morphology), semantics of the word (multiple meanings, synonyms, antonyms), and even the social appropriateness of a word's use depending on social situations (Lesaux & Kiefer, 2010; Freeman & Freman, 2014).
- Children who speak different languages often come to the learning task with vast arrays of word knowledge in multiple languages (Martinez, 2018); however, they need to build connections between and among languages through deep, personally relevant experiences when learning new words (Beck et al., 2013; Lesaux & Kiefer, 2010; Molle et al., 2022).
- The ability to recognize and read words with automaticity is tied to word and text comprehension. Fluent word recognition can be achieved through extensive reading, including repeat readings of texts for practice building prosody, expression, and automaticity (Grabe, 2010; Shanahan, 2012).

## Developing reading comprehension and academic literacies

- Academic literacy development for multilingual learners involves making meaning across languages, modes of communication, text genres, and literacy practices used in home and school contexts. Students' everyday reasoning and sensemaking practices, (e.g., critiquing a music



video or translating a text for a family member) are valuable skills and resources in the process of developing academic literacies (Lee, 2014; Martinez et al., 2008; Pacheco, 2015).

- Reading comprehension is an active, iterative process of meaning-making that depends on executive functioning skills (attention, working memory, cognitive flexibility, and planning), motivation, and engagement (Duke & Cartwright, 2021).
- Skilled readers can efficiently use combinations of strategies (activating prior knowledge, making predictions, setting reading goals, monitoring comprehension, asking questions, making inferences, summarizing, evaluating the text, and engaging in critical dialogue with the text) to comprehend texts. Research supports teaching students to use multiple strategies in flexible combinations, and engaging students in frequent discussions about text comprehension (Grabe & Yamashita, 2022; Duke & Cartwright, 2021).
- Awareness of discourse structure (how a text is organized) and variation across text types, genres, and disciplines is an important resource for developing reading comprehension (Grabe & Yamashita, 2022) and academic literacies. Students need explicit instruction in interpreting texts to understand how the organization of ideas and language patterns in disciplinary texts are shaped by norms and practices of constructing and communicating knowledge in the disciplines (Moje, 2015; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).



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### Fostering equitable literacy learning

- Reading is more than a technical skill; reading is for the purpose of expanding one’s world view and being able to critically examine and act on the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). As such, literacy instruction should support the development of students’ capacities to access, comprehend, use, evaluate, and critically reflect on texts (Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021) in ways that further students’ own goals for their lives and education.
- All students need foundational reading skills (e.g., decoding) in order to develop more advanced or specialized literacies; however, students at any point in their literacy development and at every English proficiency level should have opportunities to develop literacy through grade-level content and participation in meaningful and interactive learning. Teaching reading should encompass both learning to read texts for different purposes and learning to engage with others in making meaning of ideas and concepts in texts (Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).
- Books can allow readers to view and experience different worlds, learn about the multicultural nature of the world in which they live, and see their own worlds and experiences reflected in positive or negative ways (Sims Bishop, 1990; McNair & Edwards, 2021). To promote equity, literacy instruction should take into account how cultural perspectives, identities, and experiences are represented in reading materials and curricula, and ensure that multilingual learners have opportunities for self-affirmation as well as opportunities to understand others’ diverse experiences and worldviews.

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