

A Deeper Look at Early Literacy

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A key task of early childhood is the development of language as a basic human capacity for communication, expression, and codifying thoughts and knowledge. Education in preschool and the primary grades continues to nurture that language capacity and build upon it with an introduction to print and the development of literacy skills. Teaching children to read and write—to become literate—occurs within the larger framework of language and learning about the world. Children develop language as a vehicle for naming their world, interacting, expressing themselves, learning, and making meaning. Literacy serves as a mechanism to learn, record, and construct knowledge through print.

For Multilingual Learners (MLs), literacy development is shaped by the experience of developing two (or more) languages. Effective early language and literacy instruction for these children must be built on a combination of:

- knowledge about early childhood development and how young children learn and develop language overall;
- an understanding about how early literacy develops and about the precursors to literacy; and
- specific knowledge about the dual language brain, second language development, and MLs.

While MLs' language and literacy development shares some similarities with that of their monolingual peers, it also differs in some significant ways because MLs already have another language.

A COMPREHENSIVE LITERACY APPROACH FOR MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

Effective literacy instruction for MLs is *comprehensive, multidimensional, and:*

- integrates the four domains of language (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), connecting literacy development to language overall and to content knowledge.
- builds childrens' capacity to engage with and use language (productive and receptive) for learning, interaction, discourse, voice, and expression.
- embraces a second language development pedagogy, and recognizes the dual language brains and identities of children.
- affirms and activates the home language to build cross-language connections.
- invites children to leverage and develop their home language.
- supports children to overcome the challenges of learning English and potential barriers to participation, comprehension, and engagement.

A *comprehensive* approach to literacy instruction involves 27 elements in four categories. All of these components are important. Each supports the others. No component alone constitutes a reasonable reading or literacy approach. It is the *integration* of all of the elements in a comprehensive approach, the coherence and *alignment* of the approach over years, and the *responsiveness* of instruction to student needs that add up to effectiveness. The following pages provide more information about the four categories and their elements. Underlined element titles link to further information on the Multilingual Learning Toolkit website.

CATEGORY 1: PRECURSOR Skills and Conditions (Preschool)

(for 3 and 4 year olds, some 5 year olds—in both home language and English)

Oral Language and Vocabulary Development	Phonological Awareness	Memory and Visual Recall
Print Access and Active Engagement with Books and Text	Early Concepts of Print and Purposes of Print (Written and Read)	Early Attentiveness to Print, Beginning Letter Knowledge

This first category includes the *precursors to literacy*, comprised of six elements important to establish among young children (preschool age).

Oral Language

Building young children’s oral language is a central goal during the preschool and Kindergarten years, and continues as a component of language and literacy development throughout the grades. For young children, oral language occurs through hearing language from strong adult models and having opportunities to produce language through exploring and learning about the world. As children get older, structured opportunities to talk build knowledge of vocabulary, as well as awareness and practice with the phonemes, syntax, and language structures. Oral language supports a child’s ability to recognize and understand the words they will later encounter in print. It is the foundation for learning to read, write, and reading comprehension. For MLs, developing oral fluency in English is particularly important as a means of internalizing the sounds, structures, syntax, and vocabulary in a new language.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary knowledge is a key component and a primary determinant of reading achievement. To create meaning, readers must understand the majority of words in the text. Vocabulary plays an important part in word recognition and learning to read. Beginning readers use their knowledge of words they hear and say to make sense of words they see in print. Children work to connect the pronunciation of a sequence of sounds to a word in their vocabulary whenever they decode a word. If they find a match between the word on the page and a word they know, and it makes sense to them, they will keep reading. If a word is not a match with their vocabulary, comprehension is interrupted and they do not recognize it as a word with meaning. This is the case even when they generate the correct pronunciation through the decoding process! Vocabulary is important for reading to learn as well as learning to read. For MLs, vocabulary development is one of the greatest challenges to reading instruction. Extensive and varied vocabulary needs to be taught explicitly and integrated throughout the full curriculum.

Precursor Skills

The journey begins in the preschool years with establishing the *precursor skills* for literacy and early engagement with texts, and creating active engagement and positive attitudes about text and print. In a developmentally-appropriate approach, what is generally thought of as “reading instruction” does not start in the preschool years. Rather, the emphasis for young children is on building a strong base of oral language. The more oral language a child has, the stronger the foundation for learning to read and write. Through hearing and producing the language in the context of relationships and interaction, while exploring and learning about the world, children build vocabulary and internalize how language is structured—essential precursors to reading and writing. The foundation for later literacy is further built through a focus on phonemic awareness, positive exposure to books, basic concepts of print, skills of memory and visual recall, and awareness that there are multiple languages and cross-language connections (including for MLs, awareness of their own multiple language-ness).

Readiness to attend to print varies among young children, but discovering the purposes of print, and motivation to engage with print develops in the early years. This is why a key condition of early language/literacy development is a classroom environment that is rich with books and print (for example, classroom libraries, labeling, and posters) coupled with an environment of exploration, play, manipulatives, and visuals that provide meaning and context. Seeing text and print in the environment underscores the purposes of print, and provides opportunities for children to become familiar with text and how it works. Interactive read-alouds provide exposure to the language of books, socialization into the joy and purpose of books, and opportunities to build vocabulary. The more opportunities children have for interacting with print, the stronger their skills become and the more engaged in acts of literacy even before they have learned to read.

Preschool print exposure accelerates later literacy development and significantly predicts later reading comprehension. Children from homes and/or preschools where there is extensive access to and interaction with print (e.g., through adult read-alouds and class libraries) prior to the start of formal schooling have a [4-year head start](#) in literacy socialization compared to children who have had less opportunity to interact with print during their early years. The causal relationship between early print access, literacy engagement, and literacy achievement holds for both native speakers and second language speakers of the school language. For MLs, it is important that this immersion in print occurs in all of their languages.

CATEGORY 2: Essential ELEMENTS of Literacy Instruction (K+)	
FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS	ESSENTIAL LITERACY COMPONENTS
Phonemic Awareness	Oral Language Development
Letter Knowledge and Alphabetic Principle	Vocabulary (and Background Knowledge) across Content Areas
Phonics and Decoding	Comprehension and Meaning-making
Concepts of Print	Cross-language Connections
Fluency	Writing
	Print Immersion and Access, and Active Engagement with Text

This second category includes eleven *essential elements of literacy instruction*.

FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate separate phonemes, the smallest units of sound in oral language—including segmenting and blending those sounds. The ability to use the sounds of the language is a precursor to word-reading ability. Teacher modeling, chants, songs, rhyming and playing with sounds, choral

response, and repetitive books all provide the instructional means for phonemic awareness. For MLs, phonemic awareness is connected to an awareness of the different language systems in their own emerging bilingualism.

Letter Knowledge and Alphabetic Principle

Letter and alphabet knowledge is the knowledge of individual letter names, sounds, and shapes—and the awareness that letters and groups of letters represent sounds of spoken language. Teaching letter and sound knowledge in context includes: pointing out letters and print in the environment, talking about letters and their sounds when encountered in everyday activities, providing opportunities to play with letter shapes and sounds, explicitly referencing letter names and sounds in shared reading and writing activities, and explicitly modeling and emphasizing sounds and letters throughout the day. Children acquire a working knowledge of the alphabetic system through reading and writing. For MLs, knowing that a letter has different sounds in different languages is important. Naming these differences, and helping children develop cross-language metalinguistic awareness is an essential literacy skill.

Phonics and Decoding

Phonics is the understanding of the relationship between phonemes (the sounds of spoken language) and graphemes (the letters and spellings that represent those sounds in written language). Readers use these relationships to recognize familiar words and to decode those which are unfamiliar. Phonics instruction stresses how to use knowledge of letter-sound correspondence in reading and spelling. For MLs, it is important to recognize that phonics is language-specific. Letters can often make different sounds in different languages. Helping MLs recognize this lowers the chance of negative transfer of phonics skills.

Concepts of Print

Concepts of print refers to understanding 'how print works'. This includes understanding the function and purpose of books, print, and written language. It supports the reading process with the basic understanding that print conveys a message. Every time a teacher says a word and writes it out while saying the word, reads out loud and models that books are read from front to back, or turns a page, children are helped to understand how print works in English. Being read to and watching teachers write are ways that children orient themselves to the process of reading. This work continues as they move through the grades and are introduced to various genres and disciplinary texts. For MLs, it is critical to know that writing systems differ across languages. In English, concepts of print include the knowledge that text is read from left to right (directionality) and proceeds from the top of a page to the bottom (sweep).

Fluency

Fluency is the ability to read words accurately and quickly. Reading fluency is a critical factor in reading comprehension. If children read out loud with speed, accuracy, and proper expression, they are more likely to comprehend and remember what they have read. Various instructional approaches to teach fluency include: modeling fluent reading (in expressive read-alouds or with audiobooks), practicing sight words so students can automatically recognize words, and designing partner and class activities with choral, echo, and repeated oral reading. For MLs, an early challenge with fluency is that they are less likely to recognize English words. Learning to speak English prior to engaging in reading instruction in English contributes to eventual fluency in English reading. If possible, MLs should first learn to read in their first or strongest language. If this is not possible, students need to see and hear literally hundreds of books over a school year in order for fluency to be adequately modeled for them.

ESSENTIAL LITERACY COMPONENTS

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Comprehension Skills and Meaning-making

Comprehension of text relates both to understanding language structures and background knowledge. The knowledge a student brings about a topic correlates to the success they will have engaging with the text. Comprehension also involves use of metacognitive strategies. For example, students need to question themselves as they read and discern the meaning of words and concepts they encounter in print. To make further meaning of text, students need to talk about what they read, make connections, learn to summarize what they have read, and predict or infer what will come next. These habits are cultivated in well-planned literacy instruction.

Cross-language Connections

Studies show that a strong basis in a first language promotes school achievement in a second language. As MLs learn to read they need an intentional instructional focus on cross-language connections. Transfer and contrastive analysis strategies build metalinguistic awareness across their languages, and significantly strengthen reading skills. These include: comparing phonology and morphology and structure across the two languages; recognizing that the same letter may have different sounds in their two languages; and, investigating the ways in which the two languages are structured the same in some ways and differently in other ways. Teachers need to incorporate aspects of transfer, contrastive analysis (comparing and contrasting language systems and structures), and cross-language connections into reading instruction for MLs.

Writing

Writing is the sister of reading. What can be said orally can be written. What is written can be read. What is read has an author. Both writing and reading involve the translation of words and their meaning into and from print. Children acquire a working knowledge of the alphabetic system not only through reading but also through writing. In preschool early writing, such as drawing and dictation or intentional scribbles, children establish basic concepts of print. They learn alphabetic principles like letters represent sounds, letter recognition, and that oral language can be written and then read (from left to right). As literacy develops, student engagement in genre-specific reading and writing strengthens skills in both.

Print Immersion and Access, and Active Text Engagement

Print immersion is one of the aspects of early childhood education with [the greatest effect size](#) in supporting later literacy skills. A key part of becoming a reader is understanding the uses and purposes of text, and coming to understand the power of text to communicate, to convey information, to narrate, and to entertain. Children become readers and experience books as beneficial or enjoyable, and see print as useful for their own purposes. Key parts of reading instruction are: providing plentiful access to interesting, relevant books; engaging students with interactive or didactic read-alouds; shaping research projects where students turn to books for information; and providing experiences where students come to know the purposes and gifts of literacy and reading. Children who experience 'literacy saturation' prior to the start of formal schooling have a [4-year head start](#) in literacy socialization compared to

children who have less opportunity to interact with print. The positive impact of print exposure increases over time and accelerates literacy development. The causal relationship between print access and literacy engagement and achievement holds for both native speakers and MLs.

CATEGORY 3: Essential CONTEXTS for Effective Literacy Development

Integrated Content Knowledge and Language & Literacy Through Thematic Instruction	Safe, Affirming, and Asset-oriented Relationships, Classroom, and School Climate
Language-rich, Print-immersive, and Content-rich Learning Environment	Development of Home Language and Bilingualism
High-quality and Culturally-inclusive Relevant Materials	Differentiated Instruction Based on Formative Assessments

This third category attends to the six essential contexts of literacy development.

Integrated Content Knowledge and Language & Literacy Through Thematic Units

Integrated thematic units are designed with relevant and interesting science and social studies topics in preschool, and later around grade-level standards for science and history-social studies, with language arts and English Language Development standards woven throughout. These units provide the content context for language and literacy development, build background knowledge for literacy, and provide the conditions for MLs to make connections to strengthen both comprehension and literacy engagement with grade-level academic content. Students have the opportunity to work in small groups to hone in on certain literacy skills, and then practice and use those skills throughout the day through teaching and learning centered on a thematic unit.

Language-rich, Print-immersive, and Content-rich Environment

A language-rich environment offers language resources for children to reference such as labels, sentence frames, and vocabulary supports in a new language. A print-immersive environment improves reading performance—with impact on attitudes towards reading, motivation to read, reading behavior, basic language abilities, emergent literacy skills, reading, and writing performance. A content-rich environment offers visual and hands-on experiences to create a context for developing language. For students who are developing foundational skills in literacy, seeing text and print in their classroom environment underscores the purposes of print and provides opportunities to become familiar with text. A language-rich, print-immersive, and content-rich environment makes language accessible with: labels in the classroom, charts and print resources that capture what the class is learning, regular references to print in the environment, easily accessible books and print materials for students to use, writing centers, classroom libraries, and class-created books. The more opportunities children have for interacting with language, print, and content, the stronger their engagement and skills in literacy become.

High-quality and Culturally-inclusive Relevant Materials

The comprehensiveness, relevance, inclusiveness, and accuracy of curriculum content and materials are factors in literacy instruction. Simply put, content matters. The selection of materials must be intentional—multicultural perspectives and culturally and linguistically inclusive content are an important part of effective literacy instruction. Book selection must provide students with “[mirrors, windows, and doors](#)” into diverse experiences, and engage

students with high-quality, expressive, complex, and beautiful language. For MLs, it is critical to avoid overly simplified and impoverished materials. Teachers must use strategies to scaffold instruction and engagement with texts that share multiple linguistic, cultural, racial, ethnic, and national identities and perspectives.

Safe, Affirming, and Asset-oriented Relationships, Classroom, and School Climate

A basic foundation for learning is a safe, asset-based school and classroom environment, where students can build relationships with teachers and take risks in speaking and engaging with a new language. This is more true for MLs who are often with peers who are native speakers of English. Such a classroom community is also a key context for literacy instruction. Teachers build classroom communities that are respectful and support students in developing a prideful sense of identity and belonging, while promoting respect for others who are different. Students want to see themselves reflected in the curriculum, and their languages and cultures represented in books on the walls of the classroom. This involves establishing norms, careful messaging, and outreach with explicit activities that demonstrate that students’ cultures and languages are valued and affirmed.

Development of Home Language and Bilingualism

Research shows that emergent literacy skills in the home language transfer and can help facilitate parallel skills in English. MLs are more likely to become readers and writers of English when they are already familiar with the vocabulary and content in their home language. They are developing language as an overall capacity, and are absorbing and internalizing the specific structures, rhythms, sounds, and vocabulary that comprise the language systems of two or more specific languages. This fundamental reality must be understood and responded to in early literacy development, or language loss and interruption can occur. To support children’s home language and bilingual development, teachers include non-English materials and resources in the classroom. They also foster literacy in both languages by promoting metalinguistic awareness. Families are enlisted and supported to engage in language and literacy activities with their children in the home language. Opportunities are provided wherever possible for students to engage in literacy development in their home language.

Differentiated Instruction Based Upon Formative Assessment

Not all students develop reading and literacy in the same way or at the same pace. There is no single sequence, pace, amount of time or duration of focus on any one component of reading and literacy instruction that makes sense for all students. Teachers need to teach flexibly, based on student need—with a variety of formats. Intentional planning for 1:1, small groups, large groups, and scaffolds propel students along the continuum towards becoming proficient readers and writers. Formative assessment data of multiple aspects of literacy (reading mechanics and foundational skills, engagement in reading, writing, comprehension strategies, etc.) all facilitate appropriate differentiation.

CATEGORY 4: In a DUAL LANGUAGE/BILITERACY PROGRAM Context

<p>Strategic and Aligned Literacy Instruction Across Two Languages</p>	<p>Dual Language Assessments</p>
<p>Cross-language, Transfer, Metalinguistic Skills</p>	<p>Use of Literacy for and in Academic Study in Both Languages</p>

This fourth category speaks to additional elements of literacy development in bilingual and dual language program contexts.

Strategic and Aligned Literacy Instruction Across Two Languages

A major goal of dual language programs is biliteracy. Reading instruction happens in both languages in the early grades, with a focus on teaching cross-language transfer. This means that literacy skills do not have to be taught twice in each language. Strategic alignment of instruction across two languages, enabling students to exercise cross-language skills, is more efficient. This alignment can involve simultaneous or sequential literacy skills development, but it always builds across the two-language systems. Lack of alignment and coordination results in wasted time in school, and often narrows the curriculum into two literacy blocks. This is a lost opportunity to build metalinguistic cross-language connections that strengthen literacy. Literacy instruction must be authentic to each language.

Cross-language, Transfer, Metalinguistic Skills

The multilingual brain is positioned to make connections across languages, focus on the unique aspects of each language, and form generalizable understandings of what is shared across languages. This awareness results in cognitive flexibility. MLs benefit from having two languages that interact and complement one another. There are universal literacy skills and concepts that transfer from one language to another and do not need to be explicitly taught. This transfer shortens the developmental progression of the skills in the second language. Examples of universal skills and concepts include: alphabetic and orthographic awareness, habits, and attitudes about reading and writing, higher level thinking and metacognitive skills and strategies, and content knowledge. There are other skills and concepts that are language-specific and must be explicitly taught. Examples include print directionality, how different genres work, grammatical structures, vocabulary, and orthography.

Dual Language Assessments

In dual language programs students are acquiring valuable literacy skills in two languages. To achieve proficiency and biliteracy in both languages, academic development needs to be assessed in both languages. This way teachers can respond to learning needs in a timely manner. Assessing only in English reveals “half the story.” Dual language assessment requires the use of multiple measures in both languages to determine students’ progress towards meeting bilingualism and biliteracy goals, as well as curricular and content-related goals. Teachers, schools, and districts need a clear means of determining whether students are on the appropriate trajectory towards full linguistic and academic proficiency in both languages. Assessment of content knowledge must match the language of instruction.

Use of Literacy for and in Academic Study in Both Languages

Because language and literacy develop in the context of learning across a curriculum, and because literacy skills are used and practiced in the course of academic study, dual language programs engage students in the application of literacy in both languages. This is the means for students to become both bilingual and biliterate.

ALIGNMENT ACROSS GRADES

Developing skills as a reader does not just happen at one point in the schooling journey, and it does not look the same at all age and grade levels. Reading skills develop across the years. During this journey, students need developmentally-appropriate instruction about reading and writing, clear modeling, plentiful access to books, multiple opportunities for practice and application, and specific feedback.

The journey begins in the *preschool years* with establishing the *precursor skills* for literacy and early engagement with texts. The emphasis for young children is on building a strong base of oral language. The more oral language a child has, the stronger the foundation for learning to read and write. Through hearing and producing the language in the context of relationships and exploring and learning about the world, children build the vocabulary and internalize how language is structured—essential precursors to reading and writing. Readiness to attend to print varies among young children.

Preschool & Transitional Kindergarten (TK)

Focus on the precursors to literacy: Develop rich oral language and wide vocabulary, build phonemic awareness and overall linguistic awareness, provide positive exposure to and engagement with books, model concepts of print, include an initial focus on alphabet and letter symbols, and instill awareness that there are multiple languages and that children are developing bilingualism.

The journey continues with a focus on *all of the elements of literacy instruction* in the critical *primary grades*. In the *upper grades* students build depth, particularly related to comprehension and the linguistic complexity of text. As students progress on this journey they increasingly rely on literacy to engage in a range of disciplinary text and genres.

Primary Grades: Kindergarten, First, and Second Grades

Focus on learning to read and becoming readers and writers: Instruct foundational skills, emphasize plentiful engagement with books, focus on wide vocabulary development, teach comprehension skills, and emphasize meaning making. Utilize and develop literacy skills in the context of academic work, and where possible as part of integrated thematic unit study. Pair writing with reading and position children as authors. Provide small group opportunities for skills practice and review. Address cross language connections and transfer (home language-English). Provide print and content-rich environments that immerse students in access to books and essential references and tools.

Where possible, present reading instruction in the home language (strongest language) first or simultaneous with English as second language.

Upper Grades: Third Grade and Beyond

Focus on continuing development of literacy: Engage students with text types of various genres of print as appropriate and linked to academic thematic units. Introduce more sophisticated engagement with language functions and complex structures as found in academic text. Continue exploration of cross language connections. Actively utilize literacy skills as part of academic tasks.

Where possible, continue the development of literacy in both the home language and English, and engagement with literacy in both languages for academic study and pleasure.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

There are multiple components in a strong, effective approach to develop MLs as readers and writers. The hallmarks of a comprehensive and ML-responsive approach to literacy development include commitment to all components described above, delivered in the context of an overall strong language development approach, and integrated with content learning.

There must also be explicit attention to the fact that MLs are students with two (or more) languages and a dual language brain. This means addressing second language development through both integrated and designated English Language Development and support for bilingualism. The sociocultural contexts of literacy are recognized and incorporated through culturally- and linguistically-sustaining content of the chosen texts, and through the affirmation of bilingual and bicultural development.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

This multidimensional and comprehensive approach requires careful planning to incorporate explicit attention to each component and to create the bridges and connections across components that make it powerful. Curriculum can provide tools and materials and overall standards-driven frames, scopes, and sequences. But it is teachers who have the job of making it responsive to student needs.

Teachers cannot make this happen on their own. System supports must include collaborative planning time, resources for appropriate and aligned materials, professional learning for teachers related to reading and literacy and language development for MLs, coaches to support quality instruction, assessment materials appropriate for this comprehensive understanding of literacy that are culturally- and linguistically-appropriate for MLs, and leadership that understands both what constitutes effective literacy for MLs and what is at stake.