



Accessible and Responsive Literacy Instruction: Grade-Specific Recommendations for Multilingual Learners in Illinois

Companion to the
ILLINOIS COMPREHENSIVE LITERACY PLAN

April 2026

Introduction

For multilingual learners to thrive academically and socially, educators must plan for and implement developmentally appropriate, linguistic and culturally relevant, and meaningful literacy teaching and learning. These practices are most effective when educators affirm multilingual learners' identities, foster a sense of belonging, and amplify their voices. This document serves as a companion to the [Illinois Comprehensive Literacy Plan](#) and are designed to guide teachers and school leaders to nurture multilingual learners' growth as readers, writers, and orators by providing opportunities to explore and express themselves in multiple languages and modes of communication. These guidelines provide foundational principles and concrete examples for promoting linguistic and culturally relevant and appropriate instructional practices that capitalize on rich interaction in and across content areas, and among peers, teachers, families and the wider community. This in turn, sets multilingual learners up for academic success and positions them to thrive in a multicultural and multilingual global landscape.

Ample research findings on the processes of developing two or more languages emphasizes that humans are born with the neurological capacity to simultaneously learn multiple languages (Bialystok, 2017; Barac et al, 2014; Buysse et al, 2014; Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams, 2013; Conboy & Montanari, 2016; Hoff et al., 2012; Kuhl, 2015; Nicoladis et al., 2016; Winsler et al., 2014). Growing up with more than one language has significant advantages including enhanced cognitive flexibility and development, increased problem-solving skills, sharper language abilities, amplified socio-cultural awareness and competencies (Chamorro and Janke, 2020; De Houwer, 2021). Bilingualism is also empirically associated with enhanced literacy development and with better school outcomes such as increased high school graduation rates, college enrollment, academic persistence and higher cumulative GPAs and SAT scores (Ball et al, 2022; Garibay-Mulattieri and Vonderlack-Navarro, 2020; Papastefanou, 2021). In addition, bilingualism and biliteracy are associated with improved employment prospects and income mobility, offering expanded career choices and job opportunities, and higher earning potential (Churkina et al., 2023; Liwiński, J. 2019; New American Economy, 2017). Equally importantly, home language maintenance fosters strong ties with family, culture, and community. These connections in turn support students' healthy socio-emotional and identity development (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2016; Nicoladis et al., 2016).



Purpose

These grade-specific recommendations aim to provide linguistically and culturally appropriate and responsive guidance for educators and school/district leaders implementing the *Illinois Comprehensive Literacy Plan*. This guide offers specific considerations, strategies, and tools to ensure multilingual learners who are developing English as their second or new language succeed in school. The guidelines are designed to provide a broad research-based framework for delivering equitable, inclusive, linguistically and culturally responsive literacy instruction. The purpose is twofold:

1. Provide school and district leaders/administrators the necessary understanding and knowledge about the unique learning needs of multilingual learners in the process of acquiring English as their new language and developing strong literacy foundations, including biliteracy for students enrolled in bilingual and dual language education programs.
2. Provide classroom teachers specific knowledge and tools to foster literacy development in their students' home language and English while affirming and leveraging students' home cultures and identities; and to ensure all learners have access to rigorous grade-level content and strong socio-cultural socio-emotional development, as well as the opportunity to thrive academically and acquire high levels of biliteracy in bilingual dual language contexts.

These recommendations can help district/school administrators and instructional leaders to make linguistic and culturally sound and appropriate decisions when considering instructional literacy practices, adopting and selecting curricular and instructional materials, selecting and using valid and reliable assessment tools designed for second language learners, and in implementing systemic family/community engagement and outreach.

Intended Audience

The primary audiences for *Accessible and Responsive Literacy Instruction: Grade-Specific Recommendations for Multilingual Learners in Illinois* are PK-12 educators, and school/district leaders and administrators who serve multilingual learners regardless of program type (transitional bilingual education, dual language education, English as a second language, and general education).

1. PK-12 classroom teachers (monolingual English general education, bilingual education, ESL)
2. Literacy coaches and other certified support staff
3. School leaders (principals, assistant principals, deans, etc.)
4. District administrators (superintendents, assistant superintendents, relevant departmental directors, multilingual learners directors, etc.)
5. Illinois state educational administrators

Multilingual Learners in Illinois

Illinois is home to one of the most linguistically diverse student populations in the United States. Multilingual learners come from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, enriching schools and classrooms with their diverse perspectives and experiences. While this linguistic and cultural diversity is especially concentrated in urban areas like Chicago Public Schools, multilingual learners are present in nearly every district across the state.



According to the *Illinois 2023-2024 English Learner Statistical Report*, 332,936 multilingual learners were enrolled in Illinois public schools in 2023-2024, making up approximately 16.4% of the total student population. Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) programs were implemented in 637 school districts serving 212,260 multilingual learners while Transitional Programs of Instruction (TPI) was implemented in 607 school districts serving 67,930 students. Approximately 20.31% (59,393) of multilingual learners in Illinois public schools also have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

Illinois is considered a *majority-minority* state in terms of racial/ethnic public-school enrollment in that the racial/ethnic groups collectively make up more than 50% of the total student population. Below are the top languages spoken by multilingual learners enrolled in Illinois PreK-12 public schools as well as the racial/ethnic make-up of all Illinois public school students. It is important to note that while many Latino students are fully proficient in English, many come from homes where Spanish is spoken.

Race/ethnicity of P-12 public school students	
Latino	27.0%
Black (Non-Hispanic)	16.0%
Asian	1.5%
American Indian	0.2%
Pacific Islander	0.1%
Multiracial	4.2%
Gujarati	1.0%
White (Non-Hispanic)	46.0%

Top languages spoken by MLs in P-12 public schools	
Spanish	73.3%
Arabic	3.5%
Polish	1.9%
Russian	1.7%
Ukrainian	1.7%
Urdu	1.5%
Tagalog	1.2%
Chinese	1.1%

Understanding multilingual learner demographic trends is essential for designing appropriate literacy practices, allocating resources equitably, ensuring all students have access to high-quality instruction and opportunities for academic success. This information helps educators and policymakers recognize the strengths and needs of multilingual students, support culturally and linguistically responsive teaching, and promote inclusive school communities.



Law and Policy

The education of multilingual learners is governed by federal and state laws that ensure their civil rights, mandates appropriate language instructional programs, and promotes equitable access to academic content and services.

Relevant Federal Level Laws (see appendix for definitions)

- Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VI)
- Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974
- *Lau v. Nichols*, 1974
- *Plyler v. Doe* of 1982
- Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Title III) as amended by ESSA in 2015
- Office for Civil Rights and Department of Justice Guidance

Particularly important is *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), a landmark United States Supreme Court decision that codified the rights of all children, regardless of immigration status, to a free and public K-12 education.

Under *Plyler v. Doe*, schools and districts CANNOT:

1. *Deny enrollment based on immigration status*: All children, regardless of legal status, have the right to a free public K–12 education.
2. *Require proof of citizenship or legal residency*: Schools cannot ask for Social Security numbers, green cards, or immigration documents as a condition for enrollment.
3. *Charge tuition to undocumented students*: Public education must be free for all students, including those who are undocumented.
4. *Create barriers that discourage enrollment*: Excessive paperwork, invasive questions, or policies that intimidate families are not allowed.
5. *Discriminate based on immigration status*: All students must be treated equally in access to programs, services, and opportunities.

Relevant Illinois State Level Laws

Article 14c of the Illinois School Code outlines requirements relevant to multilingual learners enrolled in PK-12 public schools. Some key provisions of the law include:

1. *Program Requirements*: School districts must provide a Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) program when there are 20 or more multilingual learners with the same home language in a school. If there are fewer than 20, a Transitional Program of Instruction (TPI) must be offered.
2. *Parental Notification*: Parents must be notified in writing—in both English and the home language—within 30 days of the school year (or 14 days after mid-year enrollment) if their child is placed in a bilingual program. The notice must include:
 - a. reason for placement
 - b. child’s English proficiency level
 - c. instructional methods used
 - d. program goals and exit criteria
 - e. parents’ rights to opt out or visit the program
3. *Instructional Goals*: Programs must provide appropriate instruction, so students achieve English proficiency and meet grade-level academic standards, while also supporting their native language



development when possible. TBE and dual language programs must also include instruction in the history and culture of multilingual learners and their families in addition to the history and culture of the United States.

4. *Teacher Qualifications:* Teachers in TBE programs must hold a bilingual education endorsement and teachers in TPI programs must hold an ESL endorsement.
5. *Program Evaluation:* Districts are required to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their bilingual education programs and report data to ISBE annually.

Terminology

In the field of multilingual education there are both evolving and interchangeable terms used for students, programs, and instructional approaches, reflecting the dynamic nature of language development and the diverse identities of multilingual learners.

Terms for Students Developing English as a New Language

- *Multilingual Learners:* Preferred term given its focus on multilingualism rather than on English. This is the term used in this document and by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Multilingual Division.
- *English Learners or English Language Learner:* Because of the emphasis on English only, the term has been less frequently used and has increasingly been replaced by the term multilingual learners.
- *Emergent Bilinguals:* Emphasizes development in two or more languages. The term has been less frequently used as it may be interpreted as emphasizing the beginning stages of bilingualism (emergent).
- *Dual Language Learners (DLLs):* Term used for young students developing English as a new language in PreK classrooms. The term does not mean students are necessarily in dual language education programs.
- *Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE):* Refers to students who have experienced interrupted schooling due to factors like war, migration, poverty, or natural disasters, and who often have not had literacy instruction in their home language or familiarity with formal school environments and expectations.

Language Program Terms

- *Dual Language Education (DLE):* An additive bilingual education model where students develop biliteracy, bilingualism, cross-cultural competencies, and achieve academically. One-way models enroll multilingual learners who are developing English as their second language while two-way models include these students as well as English dominant speaking students.
- *Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE):* A state mandated program when there are 20 or more multilingual learners in a school who share the same home language. The program is designed to provide literacy and content instruction in students' home language while they acquire English as



a new language through ESL. Students transition to English general education classrooms once they reach English language proficiency determined by ACCESS test scores.

- *Transitional Program of Instruction (TPI)*: A state mandated program designed to provide specialized English instruction (through ESL) to multilingual learners in schools where there are fewer than 20 students from the same language background.
- *English as a Second Language (ESL)*: A state mandated instructional program where multilingual learners develop the English language alongside academic content. ESL instruction is delivered according to language proficiency levels utilizing WIDA standards and language objectives in addition to specialized second language curriculum, strategies, and assessments to support

Bilingual Pedagogical Terms

- *Biliteracy* is the ability to read and write proficiently in two languages and incorporates bilingual oracy and oral skills.
- *Translanguaging* is a teaching strategy and theoretical framework that allows students to use all their linguistic resources—across languages—to make meaning, learn, and communicate (García and Wei, 2014).
- *Cross-Linguistic Connections* refers to understanding and making use of the morphological, phonological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic differences and similarities between two languages.
- *Metabilingual Awareness* refers to cognitive processes that allow bilinguals to understand, monitor, control, and manipulate two or more languages. The ability to think and talk about each language explicitly, understand rules and structures of each language, analyze components of the two languages, compare and contrast differences and similarities between languages, manipulate both languages while abiding by their grammatical rules and intended meanings (Soltero, 2016).
- *Funds of Knowledge* refers to the rich bodies of knowledge, skills, and experiences that students and their families possess, often rooted in their cultural, linguistic, and community backgrounds. Intentionally drawing on and integrating students’ home, cultural, and community experiences (funds of knowledge) in the curriculum enhances teaching and enriches students’ learning (González, et al., 2005).

About Multilingual Learners

There are several aspects about multilingual learners that are critical for teachers and school/district leaders to have knowledge about and understand. The most fundamental aspect is that multilingual learners are developing proficiency in a new language while engaging with demanding academic content and often navigating challenging social, cultural, and political landscapes that shape their educational experiences and their sense of safety and belonging. Multilingual learners may face isolation or discrimination, and culturally, they may experience a disconnect between their heritage and the dominant culture of the school.

Additionally, multilingual learners are a highly heterogeneous group, so it is important for educators to take into account their diverse backgrounds and characteristics:



- Most are born in the United States (approximately 72%) with higher percentages in PreK-2 grades
- Some are recent arrivals while others may be second generation
- Some have never been immigrants (e.g. Native American, Puerto Rico, Guam, etc.)
- Some have severe traumatic experiences from displacement and immigrating to the U.S.
- Not all come to school as beginners (Entering, WIDA) in English
- Varying degrees of language proficiency with some being bilingual or multilingual while others are monolingual in their home language
- Varying degrees of educational background with some having high levels of country-of-origin education while others may have interrupted or no schooling (e.g. Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education [SLIFE]).





Considerations for Developing Literacy Across Two or More Languages

To effectively reflect multiliteracy and biliteracy in these guidelines, it is essential to incorporate diverse modes of communication and literacy across multiple languages, considering students' full linguistic repertoire across all their languages as well as how cultural aspects are deeply embedded in language (both in the home language as well as in English). Other important considerations include the critical role of oral language as foundational for literacy development at all grade levels. This is particularly important as students are developing English as their second language, acquiring content knowledge, and developing academic home language in bilingual education programs. This approach also recognizes that literacy is not just about reading and writing but also about navigating and understanding various forms of communication, including digital, visual, and oral literacies, in multiple languages and at a developmentally appropriate level. These guidelines integrate these concepts to recognize essential components of literacy that develop competency and the love of reading and writing in all of students' languages.

Including instructional practices that help multilingual learners develop metacognition, metalinguistic awareness, metabilingual awareness, and metacultural awareness (see Figure below) are highly effective in increasing their academic achievement, language and literacy/biliteracy skills, sociocultural competences, and socio-emotional well-being. The following graphic defines these elements of literacy development for multilingual learners.



THE 4 METAS- (S. Soltero, 2021)

META	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
METACOGNITION	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Consciously reflecting on one's own thinking processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Think out loud through steps to solve a problemMonitor my own reading comprehension and self-correct when needed 
METALINGUISTIC AWARENESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Consciously reflecting about language;Ability to manipulate structures of language	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Adapt my language depending on the audience and the purposeUnderstand shades of meaning between words like <i>small</i> and <i>tiny</i> 
METACULTURAL AWARENESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Consciously reflecting on diverse cultural perspectives;Reflect on culturally-embedded language styles/practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Awareness that the Spanish-speaking world is made of distinct cultures and historiesUnderstand the nature of bilinguals' hybrid and bicultural identities 
METABILINGUAL AWARENESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Consciously reflecting about similarities/differences between 2 or more languages;Ability to manipulate both languages while maintaining intended meanings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Understand aspects of language and literacy that are universal across languagesKnow why literal translation does not often convey the exact meaning intendedAbility to create bilingual poems and jokes 

Engaging students in the four meta categories described above should always incorporate relevant cultural aspects of each language, particularly around morphology, semantics and pragmatics. In addition, for languages like Spanish that have such diversity in regional varieties, there should also be exploration of cultural influences on regional “Spanishes”, including “Spanishes” of the U.S. as well as exploring word origins. For example, *tomate* (tomato) comes from the Nahuatl word *tomatl*, the word *aceite* (oil) comes from the Arabic word *zayt* (Soltero, 2021).

The *Illinois Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards* adopted in 2021 (see <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Culturally-Responsive-Teaching-Leading-Standards.aspx>) is a useful resource that enhance the following considerations:

Linguistically and Culturally Responsive Instructional Approaches

- Encourage students to use their full linguistic repertoire to make meaning and demonstrate understanding.
- In bilingual education dual language programs, engage students in critical thinking and problem-solving activities that are grounded in meaning (limit rote learning and memorization)
- Use clear, age-appropriate language with visual supports
- Use varied scaffolding techniques and ensure a gradual release so students can eventually do tasks independently (do not overuse scaffolds like sentence frames or leveled texts)
- For more information see *IL Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards: A. Self-Awareness and Relationships to Others and D. Students as Co-Creators*

Linguistically and Culturally Responsive Curriculum and Instructional Materials

- Include the history and culture of the multilingual learners and their families in the curriculum
- Integrate *Funds of Knowledge* in the curriculum by designing tasks that allow students to draw on their home, community, and cultural knowledge
- In English-medium general education classrooms, make materials available in students' home languages when possible



- In bilingual education dual language programs, utilize high quality authentic non-English language instructional materials
- Use instructional materials such as texts, digital, supplemental, etc. that are rigorous and have grade level academic content (not simplified or watered down)
- *For more information see IL Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning Standard G. Content Selections in all Curricula*

Linguistically and Culturally Responsive Assessment Practices

- Allow students multiple modes of expression to demonstrate understanding through speaking, drawing, or using their home language when appropriate
- Avoid unnecessarily complex vocabulary, sentence/discourse structures, or idioms
- Scaffold assessments by including visuals, sentence starters, glossaries or word banks, and guided questions to support comprehension
- Assess language and content separately to ensure that language barriers do not mask content knowledge
- Incorporate culturally relevant contexts by using examples, scenarios, and texts that reflect students' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences
- Avoid cultural bias by reviewing items for assumptions or references that may disadvantage students from different cultural groups

Linguistically and Culturally Responsive Family Engagement

- Engage families and communities through culturally appropriate ways to communicate assessment goals and results
- *For more information see IL Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning Standard F. Family and Community Collaboration*

Grade Clusters

The information described above provides the necessary backdrop for the recommendations organized by grade level. These offer age-appropriate and specific instructional practices, strategies and examples according to grade clusters: Preschool, K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. Each grade level section is organized in three major categories:

Linguistically and Culturally Responsive Learning Environment

Classroom and school practices and routines that view the development of literacy in the context of the whole child, purposefully tapping into the strengths and assets of multilingual learners, attending to their socio-emotional well-being, and incorporating family and community connections.

Oracy Development and Linguistic Interaction

Types of engagement and interaction (teacher to student, peer-to-peer) that further the relationship between oral language (listening as well as speaking) and reading/writing/drawing. This engagement and interaction take full advantage of multilingual learner's linguistic and cultural resources across all domains of learning/content areas.

Literacy Instructional Practices, Curriculum, and Assessment

Literacy development is integrated across all learning/domains content areas. The intentional and systematic use of cross linguistic connections is made explicit and relates to the specific language needs of students and content areas. Considerations regarding cultural responsiveness and relevance, the language proficiency level(s) of the students, and applicability to content learning goals guide selection of materials.



Appendix

Federal Law

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964: prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national origin in programs receiving federal funds. Under Title VI, schools must take affirmative steps to address language barriers so that ELs can meaningfully participate in educational programs. This includes providing appropriate language assistance services and ensuring communication with limited English proficient (LEP) parents in a language they understand

Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA) of 1974: requires that no state shall deny equal educational opportunity by failing to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by students in instructional programs. This law reinforces the obligation of schools to implement sound educational programs for ELs and monitor their effectiveness

Lau v. Nichols, 1974: a U.S. Supreme Court case that significantly impacted educational rights for students acquiring English as their second language. The Court ruled that **failure to provide English language instruction to non-English-speaking students violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964**, specifically **Title VI**, which prohibits discrimination based on national origin in programs receiving federal funding. The impact of the ruling included:

- Schools must take affirmative steps to help students overcome language barriers.
- It led to the development and expansion of bilingual education and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs.
- Reinforced the idea that equal treatment does not mean equal opportunity if students cannot access the curriculum due to language barriers.

Title III Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended by ESSA (2015): provides federal funding to help ELs attain English proficiency and meet academic standards. It supports language instruction educational programs (LIEPs) and requires states and districts to:

- Identify and assess ELs,
- Provide effective language instruction,
- Monitor progress, and
- Report outcomes.

ESSA also emphasizes accountability for ELs' academic achievement and English language development

Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and Department of Justice (DOJ) Guidance: joint guidance to clarify schools' legal obligations to ELs and their families. This includes:

- Ensuring meaningful access to core curriculum,
- Providing qualified ESL/bilingual teachers,
- Avoiding unnecessary segregation of ELs, and
- Communicating with LEP parents in their preferred language



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