

Supporting Multilingual Learners: A Framework for Evidence-Informed Decision-Making

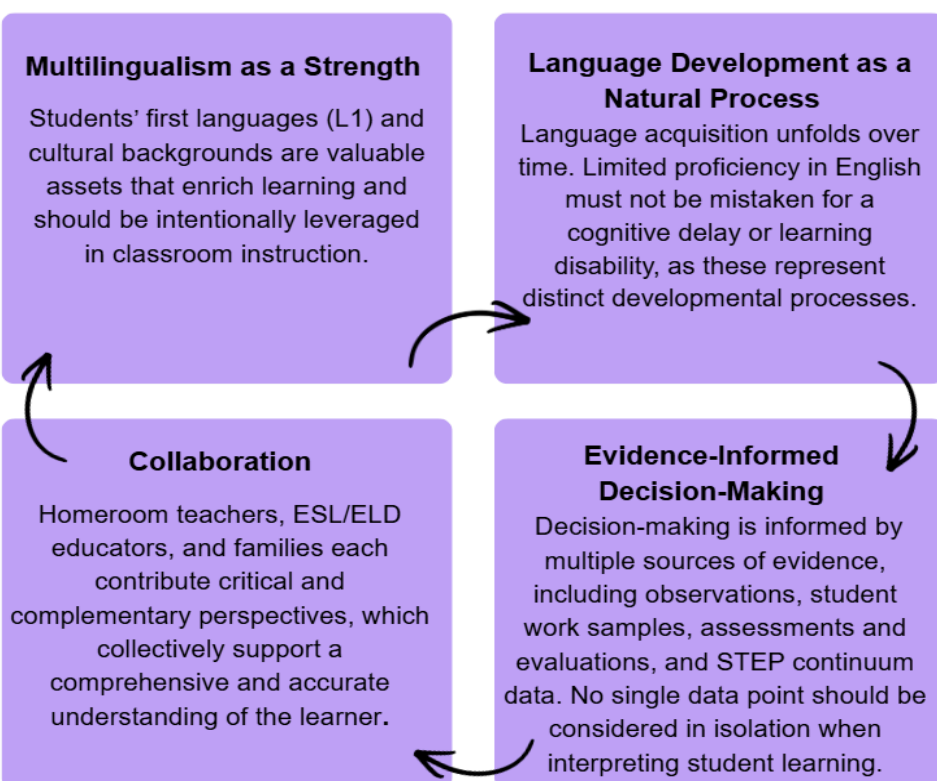
This framework supports educators in gathering meaningful, classroom-based evidence when working with Multilingual Learners (MLLs) whose progress may appear uneven or differ from expectations. Language acquisition challenges are sometimes misinterpreted as learning or cognitive difficulties, which can result in premature referrals to special education.

The purpose of this framework is to guide educators in examining student learning through intentional instruction, observation, and reflection. It emphasizes responsive teaching, instructional adaptations, family engagement, and the use of multilingual and culturally responsive resources.

By centering language development and providing MLLs with sufficient time, appropriate supports, and multiple ways to demonstrate understanding, this framework promotes informed, equitable decision-making. It ensures that referrals are considered only after sustained, well-documented instructional support.

Guiding Principles:

These guiding principles help prevent premature referrals and promote inclusive, strength-based practices that honour the full linguistic, cultural, and academic potential of every Multilingual Learner. This framework is intended to be used when educators have ongoing concerns about a Multilingual Learner's progress, despite the provision of appropriate language supports and instructional adaptations.



Educators should use this framework when:

- The student has been receiving responsive ESL/ELD programming aligned with their current STEP level and language-learning needs.
- Instructional accommodations and adaptations have been consistently implemented across subject areas and over time.
- The student's progress remains limited, inconsistent, or uneven despite sustained support, rather than being based on isolated tasks or short-term observations.
- Evidence of learning has been gathered across multiple contexts, including oral language, reading, writing, content areas, and learning behaviours.

By using this framework proactively, schools strengthen their ability to provide responsive instruction, reduce unnecessary referrals, and ensure that concerns brought forward are grounded in equitable, evidence-based practice.

Key Considerations for Multilingual Learners

Prior to gathering evidence or raising concerns, educators must share a common understanding of how MLLs acquire language and demonstrate learning. These considerations ensure that student progress is interpreted through a language-development lens, not a deficit perspective.

Language Acquisition:

Listening and speaking skills form the foundation for reading and writing. Research indicates that it can take 5–7 years for English language learners to develop academic language proficiency, even with strong instruction (Thomas & Collier, 2002 as cited in Berens, Kovelman, & Pettito, 2019). As a result, literacy challenges may reflect ongoing oral language development rather than underlying learning difficulties. This underscores that language learning is a long-term process requiring patience, intentional support, and sustained instructional opportunities.

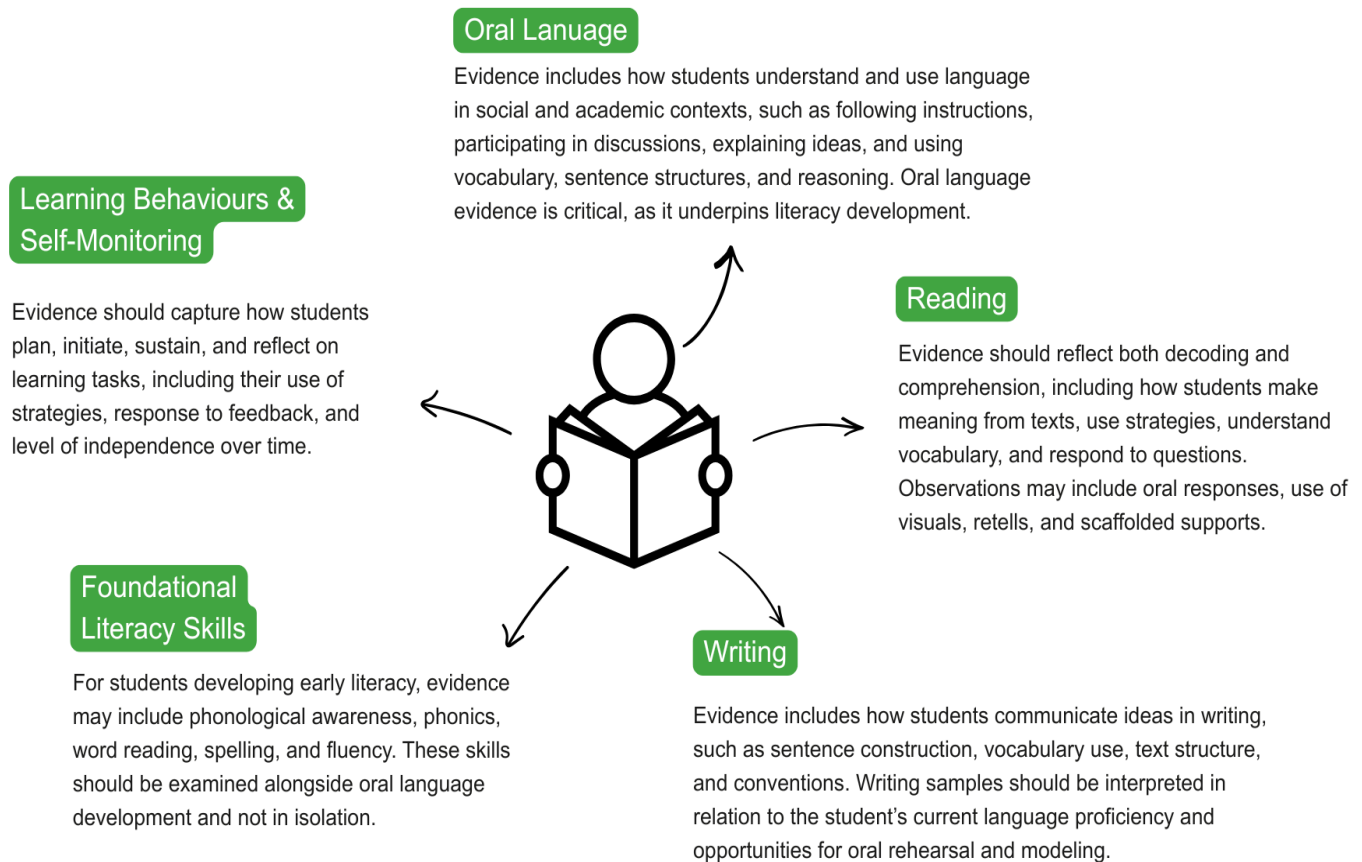
Expression of Learning:

MLLs often understand concepts before they can express them in a new language. Limited oral or written output does not indicate limited comprehension or cognitive ability. Students draw on their full linguistic repertoires, to make meaning. Translanguaging, the intentional and flexible use of all of a learner's languages to think, communicate, and learn, supports deeper understanding and affirms students' linguistic identities (García, 2009; García & Wei, 2014, as cited in Cummins, 2019).

Written work alone is insufficient to capture learning. Evidence should include oral responses, observations, demonstrations, and interactions, and be gathered with and without scaffolds to show how students respond to instruction over time. Since language proficiency influences how learning is demonstrated, educators must provide multiple, accessible ways for students to show understanding and encourage the continued development of students' first languages.

Areas of Evidence to Collect

When concerns about a Multilingual Learner's progress arise, evidence should be gathered across multiple areas of language and learning, rather than relying on a single task, subject, or product. Evidence should be drawn from the following interconnected areas:



Educators are encouraged to refer to the STEP-aligned instructional assessment charts linked below to support programming, planning and evidence gathering.

- [STEP Chart Grades 1-3 Assessment](#)
- [Reading STEP Chart](#)
- [Writing STEP Chart](#)
- [Foundational Skills STEP Chart](#)

This [evidence-gathering template](#) can support educators in documenting evidence of learning over time and across contexts. These templates are not intended to function as checklists or diagnostic instruments. Rather, they serve as tools for observing patterns of strength, students' responses to instruction, and language development in relation to the support provided. When completing and analyzing these templates, educators are encouraged to consider the task and context, the level of scaffolding offered, and how the student demonstrates understanding and growth over time.

Interpreting Patterns of Strength and Need

Once evidence has been gathered across multiple areas of language and learning, teams must interpret it holistically. The purpose of interpretation is not to label or diagnose, but to identify patterns that inform next instructional steps and determine whether concerns are primarily related to language development, access to instruction, or other learning needs. Interpreting patterns over time helps teams avoid deficit-based conclusions and ensures that decisions are grounded in evidence, context, and the student's language-learning trajectory.

OBSERVED PATTERN OF STRENGTH AND NEED	WHAT THIS MAY INDICATE	INSTRUCTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS / NEXT STEPS
Strong oral language; beginning or developing decoding skills	Literacy skills are developing more slowly than oral language	Provide explicit, structured literacy instruction (phonics, phonological awareness, word reading) while continuing to build oral language
Strong comprehension when text is read aloud; limited independent reading comprehension	Decoding or fluency barriers are limiting access to text	Reduce print demands temporarily, allow oral responses, and target decoding and fluency instruction
Strong understanding demonstrated through oral, visual, or L1 responses; limited English writing	Language production demands exceed current English proficiency	Provide oral rehearsal, sentence frames, modeling, and opportunities to use L1 and translanguageing
Inconsistent performance across tasks and contexts	Learning is highly dependent on scaffolds or familiarity	Examine task demands, increase explicit instruction, and gradually release supports
Difficulty in both oral and written language over time, despite consistent support	Language development may be slower and require intensified language instruction	Increase frequency and intensity of language-focused instruction; monitor progress closely over time
Strong content knowledge with limited academic language	Conceptual understanding is present; academic language is still developing	Explicitly teach academic vocabulary, sentence structures, and discourse patterns
Improved performance with visuals, modeling, or structured supports	Access to instruction improves with scaffolding	Continue intentional scaffolding and plan for gradual removal as independence increases
Limited progress despite sustained, well-documented instructional support across domains	Concerns may extend beyond language acquisition alone	Bring comprehensive evidence to IST/SST for collaborative problem-solving and next steps

Decision-making before referral should be collaborative, evidence-informed, and grounded in a school-based problem-solving approach. When concerns arise about an MLL's progress, the classroom teacher, in collaboration with the ESL/ELD teacher and other relevant staff, should review evidence gathered. Concerns are initially discussed through the In-School Team (IST) process, with a focus on refining instruction, adjusting accommodations and modifications, and identifying next steps for monitoring progress.

Referral to the School Support Team (SST) is a thoughtful and collaborative process. It is considered when sustained, well-documented instructional strategies and targeted interventions have been implemented, reviewed, and refined over time, and when evidence indicates that a student's learning needs may extend beyond language acquisition. Family perspectives remain central throughout this process, ensuring that decisions reflect shared understanding, collaborative planning, and a commitment to identifying the most appropriate support for the learner.

The SST plays a proactive role in supporting student progress. Once a referral is made, the team works collaboratively with educators and families to review student strengths, learning profiles, and instructional histories. The SST helps identify next steps, which may include refining classroom strategies, recommending additional interventions, coordinating assessments, or connecting the student with specialized support. Through this collective problem-solving approach, the SST ensures that each student receives responsive, well-aligned support that promotes continued growth, engagement, and achievement.

REFERENCES

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