

Multilingual Learners & Special Education Support

Educators are expected to gather and review evidence over time, including initial assessment information, STEP progress, classroom assessments, and student work. The use of [Supporting Multilingual Learners: A Framework for Evidence-Informed Decision-Making](#) is encouraged to ensure that language-responsive instruction has been consistently implemented and reviewed.

This document provides information and guidance to support multilingual learners (MLLs) who may present learning needs, in addition to their language acquisition needs. It outlines how instructional supports, accommodations, and modifications that ensure language acquisition are enhanced, rather than limit, their opportunities to access the curriculum, engage in learning, and confidently demonstrate what they know.

Language development is an ongoing process. Educators must differentiate between challenges related to language acquisition and those that may indicate special education needs through sustained observation, assessment, and reflective practice. All MLLs are entitled to adapted instructional programming to support their language learning, regardless of formal identification. Because language acquisition timelines vary widely and are influenced by many factors, these differences must be considered when interpreting progress and planning equitable, responsive support.

ACCOMMODATIONS AND MODIFICATIONS TO SUPPORT MLLS

Adapting the curriculum for Multilingual Language Learners involves making intentional instructional adjustments to ensure equitable access to learning while recognizing students' language development needs. These adaptations include accommodations and modifications.

Accommodations are strategies and supports that enable students to access and demonstrate learning while maintaining the grade-level curriculum expectations. For more information on accommodations to support MLLs please refer to this [Quick Reference Guide](#).

Modifications are intentional changes made to the curriculum expectations by adjusting the number and/or complexity of expectations to ensure they are challenging yet attainable. Both accommodations and modifications considerations should be made based on the MLL's STEP level, educational background and language learning needs.

For examples of modified curriculum, please refer to these updated resources:

- [STEP Modifications in Language](#) (based on the **2023 Ontario Curriculum**).
- [Adapting the Elementary Science Curriculum](#)

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Similar behaviours may have different underlying causes. The chart below supports educators in considering whether observed behaviours are related to language acquisition needs or may indicate additional learning needs within a special education context. While early identification of exceptionalities is important, it is equally critical to ensure that students are not misidentified based on behaviours associated with language acquisition, acculturation, or limited prior educational opportunities. Thoughtful observation over time and across multiple learning contexts is essential to support accurate decision-making, avoid inappropriate labelling, and ensure multilingual learners have equitable access to responsive programming and opportunities to reach their full potential.

Observable Behaviour	Possible Explanation in a Language Learning Context	Possible Explanation in a Special Education Context
Adds or deletes words; uses known words to replace others	May not yet know the word; may not have internalized vocabulary; requires more rehearsal and exposure	May have memory or oral language processing difficulties
Is easily distracted	May not fully understand instructions; may be overloaded with new language or information; needs more visual or concrete support	May have an auditory processing difficulty, ADHD, or ADD
Experiences difficulties following directions	May not understand the vocabulary used in the instructions	May have sequencing or memory difficulties
Completes math calculations, but experiences challenges with solving word problems	May not know math vocabulary; may not be familiar with the context or currency; may lack prior experience with the content	May have processing or abstract reasoning difficulties; memory or sequencing challenges; difficulty generalizing from examples
Avoids writing	May lack confidence; may feel overwhelmed by language demands; may be uncomfortable producing multiple drafts before a final version	May have fine motor difficulties and/or limited expressive language
Experiences difficulties in retelling a story in sequence or summarising a plot	May be unfamiliar with much of the vocabulary in the text	May have organization or processing difficulties

Adapted from: Else Hamayan, Barbara Marler, Cristina Sanchez-Lopez, and Jack Damico. [Special Education Considerations for Multilingual Learners: Delivering a Continuum of Services](#). Brookes Publishing, 2022, p.37-42.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. Does an MLL need to have an IEP to receive an adapted program?

No. All MLLs are entitled to receive an adapted instructional program based on their current level of English proficiency.

2. Can an MLL receive ESL support and Special Education Support Simultaneously?

Some multilingual learners (MLLs) have special education needs and are eligible to receive ESL/ELD services and special education support concurrently.

3. Are modifications for MLLs the same as modifications for students with exceptionalities?

Although the same term is used, the purpose and application of modifications differ. For MLLs, modifications should be made based on the student's STEP level and language acquisition needs.

4. How does the TDSB determine whether a multilingual learner (MLL) may have special education needs in addition to language acquisition needs?

The TDSB uses a school-based, evidence-informed process to determine whether a multilingual learner (MLL) may have special education needs in addition to language acquisition needs. Educators gather and review evidence over time, including initial assessment information, STEP progress, classroom assessments, and student work. We encourage using [*Supporting Multilingual Learners: A Framework for Evidence-Informed Decision-Making*](#) to ensure appropriate language-responsive instruction has been implemented. Concerns should be addressed through the In-School Team (IST) first, with referral to the School Support Team (SST) considered only when sustained support is in place and evidence suggests needs beyond language acquisition.

REFERENCES

Hamayan, E., Marler, B., Sanchez-Lopez, C., & Daimco, J. (2022). [*Special education considerations for Multilingual learners: Delivering a continuum of services*](#). Brookes Publishing.