

## Multilingual Learners Suspected of Having an Educational Disability

When a multilingual learner (ML) shows signs of academic, social, or behavioral difficulties, school teams must follow the same procedures they would follow for students who are not multilingual. However, teams need to consider ruling out language acquisition factors before initiating a special education evaluation. This process would include provisionally identified MLs who have not taken the English Language Proficiency (ELP) screener in 3K and 4K, as formal English Language Development (ELD) services typically begin in kindergarten in addition to MLs who have taken the ELP.

### Additional Referral Considerations for Suspicion of a Disability for MLs:

#### Initial Referral:

- The problem-solving team for multilingual students should include the parents and someone knowledgeable in language acquisition and acculturation, typically the multilingual teacher.
- Parents with limited English proficiency have the right to an interpreter at meetings, so they can fully understand discussions and participate meaningfully. In addition to an interpreter, schools must also provide translated copies of key documents, including problem-solving team forms, unless it is “clearly not feasible” to do so. In such cases, the interpreter should thoroughly explain each document.

#### Observation:

- If social skills or behavioral issues are a concern for an ML, the team must consider whether language acquisition or transition to a new environment/country is a factor.

### Key Questions for the Problem-Solving Team for MLs Suspected of Having a Disability:

1. Is there reason to suspect a disability in the primary language?
  - a. What do parents report about development in comparison to siblings, cousins, other children?
  - b. Is there a family history of learning difficulties?
  - c. Did/how long did the child attend the school in their country of origin?
  - d. Were there struggles in the schools previously attended, especially in their country of origin?
  - e. For pre-K, information about pre-academic skills in the native language (e.g., shapes, colors, counting, making needs known, self-help, etc.)
  - f. What language(s) are used in the home (and what is the amount used)?
2. What does the data from the general education teacher reveal?
  - a. Are the ILAP **accommodation** recommendations adequately supporting the students’ needs? What is the student’s response to the accommodations? Do the accommodations bridge linguistic gaps and support learning?
  - b. Are the ILAP **instructional** recommendations adequately supporting the student’s needs?
  - c. As part of the general education program, has the student been provided **additional** time and explicit instruction across educational environments on the differences between their native language and General American English (GAE) (phonemes, graphemes, morphology, syntax, figurative language, etc.)?
  - d. What data documents that the student received systematic and explicit instruction in phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension?



3. What does the data from the ML teacher reveal?
  - a. As part of the ML program, has the student been provided with **additional** time and explicit instruction across educational environments on the differences between their native language and GAE (phonemes, graphemes, morphology, syntax, figurative language, etc.)?
  - b. What is the student's language proficiency according to ACCESS assessment? What have the scores looked like over time? Are there unexpected discrepancies between speaking, listening, reading, and writing?
  - c. Have the ML teacher and general education teacher discussed/implemented changes to the accommodations and goals in the ILAP prior to referral?
  - d. How does this student compare to similar multilingual peers?
  - e. Have the ILAP **accommodations and/or instructional** recommendations been reviewed or revised prior to attending the problem-solving meeting?
4. What is the student's Stage of Language Acquisition?
  - a. Stage 1: Silent or preproduction (0-3 months of L2 exposure)
    - Responses in L2 are typically gestural and/or nonverbal (e.g., points, nods, responds to directions, etc.)
    - Attempts to communicate with speakers of English using gestures or other nonverbal methods
    - May comprehend approximately 500 words and use some new words in the second language
    - May speak some words in English
    - Actively listens to instruction and communication
  - b. Stage 2: Early preproduction (3-6 months of L2 exposure)
    - May comprehend 500-1,000 words receptively
    - Communicates in English in phrases that are 1-3 words in length
    - Able to answer "yes/no", "who", and "what" questions with short answers
    - Speaks using familiar words and phrases
    - Uses English present tense
  - c. Stage 3: Speech Emergence/Telegraphic and Formulaic Speech (6 months to 2 years of L2 exposure)
    - May comprehend approximately 3,000 words in English
    - Asks simple questions and speaks in simple sentences 3-4 words in length
    - Uses conjunctions, pronouns, demonstratives, and prepositions in English
    - Demonstrates grammatical differences that are consistent with L1
    - Participates in small group activities
    - May struggle with humor as well as abstract or figurative language
    - Able to demonstrate understanding in a variety of ways
  - d. Stage 4: Intermediate Fluency (2-3 years of L2 exposure)
    - May comprehend approximately 6,000 words in English
    - Sentence production includes some complex sentence types
    - Asks for clarification and states opinions in English
    - Demonstrates a few grammatical differences that are consistent with L1
    - Acquires new information from reading
    - May struggle with abstract content/subject areas or those that require a high degree of background knowledge or complex syntax
  - e. Stage 5: Advanced Language Proficiency (≥3 years of L2 exposure)
    - Fully participates in the educational setting
    - Speech includes a variety of sentence types with few grammatical differences
    - Social/Interpersonal language is similar to native English speakers

#### 5. Difference vs. Disability Considerations (Questions to Consider)

In the areas of identified concern, what is the student's performance with the same skill in the primary language?

- If listening and following directions are a concern, how well does the student comprehend and follow directions if given in the student's primary language?
- If the student struggles with being understood when speaking, how well is the student understood by parents when speaking their primary language?
- If the student struggles to produce certain speech sounds, are these sounds present and/or produced differently in the student's primary language?
- If the student struggles with decoding, has the student been taught the sounds and syllable shapes of GAE that are not present in the student's primary language in addition to how they are represented by letter(s)?
- If student struggles with reading comprehension and/or written expression, has the student been taught the syntax of GAE that may differ from the student's primary language in addition to GAE vocabulary and background knowledge?
- If student struggles with math, has student been taught GAE mathematical terminology and/or does proficiency increase with the use of visuals or manipulatives?
- If there are concerns with attention, does the student have adequate proficiency with GAE to understand oral language instruction?
- To help the team tease apart difference vs. disability, the following links provide information about how specific languages and dialects differ from GAE: [Instructional Hub resource](#), [ASHA](#) and [Bilingualistics](#).

---

#### **Possible Outcomes of the Problem-Solving Process:**

##### If a Disability is Not Suspected, Possible Outcomes May Include:

- No additional actions warranted. Data reveals that the student is performing commensurate with their Stage of Language Acquisition and instruction provided.
- Intensified interventions within core instruction are warranted.
- Updates to the ILAP goals or accommodations are warranted.

##### If a Disability is Suspected:

- Interventions and/or other supports should continue while moving forward with an evaluation for suspicion of a disability.