



LABELS OR LIMITATIONS?

Recommendations for Asset-Based Language
for Multilingual Learners

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A diverse group of Washington state educators — representing public schools, independent schools, and Educational Service Districts — collaborated to produce this document. They solicited feedback from parents, students, teachers and multilingual experts across the state prior to publication.

ADDITIVE LANGUAGE WORK GROUP

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ML CONSORTIUM

The ML Consortium provided input and feedback on this document. The ML Consortium is a regional network of Multilingual Directors, Specialists, and teacher leaders. We meet six times a year to collaborate around best practices, share resources and develop as leaders in supporting students who are multilingual/ELs.



Puget Sound Educational Service District is one of nine regional educational agencies serving school districts, tribal compact schools, and state approved charter and private schools in Washington state. PSESAD is committed to becoming an antiracist multicultural organization in order to eliminate opportunity gaps. PSESAD served to facilitate and support this work as part of our mission to work with educators and advocates across the state and nation to create racially just and humanizing educational systems.

Thank you to the many Washington educators who reviewed and provided feedback on this document; your input was instrumental towards creating a final product that truly represents our beliefs in the superpowers of multilingual learners in Washington state.

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“Equity work starts with our words... All school pathways for students are shaped by basic communication about students” (Pollock 2).

INTRODUCTION

Multilingual students¹ are one of the fastest growing student demographics in the United States, and are a diverse group, representing different language backgrounds. In 2017 there were five million (10.1%) multilingual students enrolled in a public school language program in the United States (“The Condition of Education 2020”). As of October 2020, there are 135,307 students enrolled in English language development programs in Washington state, representing 11.8% of the overall student population (“Washington State Report Card”). This increase represents 233 different home languages (Gallardo and Randall 3).

Educating, empowering, and responding to the needs of students in Washington state schools requires nimble efforts, not only on the part of educators, but also the decision and policy makers who support them and the community members they partner with. In order for educational systems to equitably meet the needs of those they serve, all students and families must be valued and respected for the contributions they bring to the classroom, school, and community. Thus, it is important to understand the impact of deficit-based language and the intent driving the shift to asset-based language.

For shared understanding, these terms are defined as follows:

ASSET-BASED LANGUAGE	DEFICIT-BASED LANGUAGE
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focuses on the strengths that a student brings to the learning community• Views diversity in thought, culture, and traits as positive assets• Is opportunity focused• Signals the need to change the system to meet the needs and gifts of the student	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focuses on what a student is lacking• Conveys what is missing that must be found/fixed• Is needs/problem focused• Leads educators to make assumptions about what a student may know and can do• Implies the student must change to fit the system

At its core, the purpose of this document is to:

- **Encourage** critical self reflection on the alignment of language and practice
- **Cultivate** awareness and address the differences between language that remains in law and policy and currently recognized best-practices;
- **Provide** alternative, asset-based, terminology that highlights what students, commonly labeled as English language learners or English learners, know and are able to do; and
- **Guide and facilitate** educational, equitable paradigm shifts and practices that value students’ diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

¹As the emphasis is on the multilingual skills of the individual, this group encourages individuals and organizations to use the descriptor that is most appropriate for their context (e.g., student, learner, or scholar).

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE AND LABELS

[T]erms are never neutral [...]; language, orientation, and definitions have the power to impact human relationships, identity, and academic success.

(Lu and Webster 84)

Civil Rights laws suggest that labels should only be used to “accurately describe needs and experiences students actually have and offer [the] supports people actually want” (Pollock 39). Ramon Antonio Martinez describes how labels such as English language learner and Limited English Proficient serve to limit educators’ thinking by focusing on what students do not know, particularly with regard to the strengths that bilingual and multilingual students bring to the learning community. Instead, the focus should be on how to support students’ language and literacy learning (1). Furthermore, deficit-based terms serve to “normalize monolingualism, frame students as struggling [or] at risk[,] and fail to see (or treat) them as readers or writers” (Martinez 1). This has dangerous implications for the educational opportunities that students are provided (e.g., college prep coursework) (Martinez 7).

For this reason, educators and policy makers must shift their thinking and practice away from deficit-based terminology, such as English language learners, towards terminology highlighting the strengths that students speaking multiple languages bring with them to the school community. The term “multilingual” is applicable to any student speaking two or more languages, regardless of their proficiency level or status in those languages, as it is the most asset-based recognition of students’ full linguistic repertoires.

Until the terminology in state and federal funding sources meant to support bi/multilingual students shifts away from terms such as English language learner, there will remain a need to use these terms in some contexts. We recommend that their use be isolated to contextual circumstances describing funding and programming — not to refer to individual students themselves.

HISTORICAL FRAMING

The history of language policy in the United States is both a legacy of forced assimilation and language loss, and a long standing tradition of bilingual education and community resilience in fighting for language preservation and revitalization. Reports show that the first instance of bilingual education in the United States occurred during the 17th century with Polish settlers in the first English permanent settlement in Virginia (Seidner). During the 19th and early 20th century, states across the country had bilingual programs in German, Scandinavian languages, Dutch, Czech, Italian, Polish, French and Spanish. In fact, by 1900, it is estimated that more than six percent of the 16 million elementary students at the time received bilingual instruction (Kloss).

At the same time, the federal government adopted a policy of assimilation and cultural genocide towards Native Americans with the goal to “kill the Indian, save the man”. During the Indian Boarding School era (1860-1978), Native children were forcibly separated from their families and sent to boarding schools where they were punished for expressing their culture or speaking their indigenous languages (Pember 1). This contributed towards widespread loss of indigenous languages.

World War I brought a wave of nativist policies that pressured immigrants to suppress their cultural heritage and language and adopt more Americanized practices. Multilingual students were usually placed in “English Only” classrooms with no native language instruction or support. In many cases, children were punished for speaking their native languages. Students were generally held at the same grade level until enough English was mastered to advance in subject areas. Most bilingual schools that existed into the 1920’s were eventually disbanded (Kloss).

During the Civil Rights era, Latino activists, academics and educators advocated for supporting Spanish speaking students in learning their native language, culminating in the passage of the Bilingual Education Act in 1968. Since the Civil Rights era, there have been gradual policy shifts towards recognizing the value of bilingualism and supporting language revitalization. However, this trend has been far from linear, and interrupted with periods of nativist policies and movements. In fact, until recently, California, Massachusetts and Arizona continued to have English-instruction only laws in place.

As we reflect on local and national language policies, it is critical to examine what languages have been privileged in our schools, the connection to race and ethnicity, and the impact on students. Recently, there has been some progress towards recognizing African American Languages (AAL) and other “non-standard” languages as accepted languages, including work in Los Angeles Unified School District to “acknowledge AAL as a legitimate rule-governed language and identify and support students who speak AAL in adding academic English to their linguistic repertoires,” (Hollie and Gillenwaters 2). However, for the most part AAL remains unaccepted and delegitimized in the framing of bilingual education, with implications for who we consider “bilingual” and the instructional supports and policies that result (Coady 4).

HISTORICAL FRAMING – CONTINUED

The timeline below offers a snapshot of major national and Washington state language legislation and policies in recent years. These laws and policies have shaped instructional practices within schools and, therefore, the experience of multilingual students within the U.S. educational system.

LEGISLATION OF AND RELATING TO THE EXPERIENCES OF MULTILINGUALS WITHIN THE U.S. EDUCATION SYSTEM

1964

CIVIL RIGHTS ACT

Guarantees that students in public schools who speak languages other than English have equal rights to the opportunity of education

1968

BILINGUAL EDUCATION ACT

Addendum to the Elementary and Secondary Act; establishes competitive federal funding (i.e., grants) for districts to “establish innovative educational programs for students with limited English proficiency”

1974

LAU V. NICHOLS

Supreme Court ruling that requires public schools provide simultaneous language development support and equal access to grade-level curriculum for multilingual students; uses the term “limited English proficiency” (LEP) to describe multilinguals

EQUAL EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY GAP

Mandates that schools accommodate student needs regardless of nationality and provide adequate resources for students speaking languages other than English

1981

CASTANEDA V. PICKARD

Accountability for Bilingual Education programs; must:

- Use sound educational theory
- Implement effectively with sufficient resources and personnel
- Prove effective in overcoming language barriers

2001

REAUTHORIZATION OF THE ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION ACT (NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND)

- Mandates that schools accommodate student needs regardless of nationality and provide adequate resources for students speaking languages other than English
- For the first time holds districts accountable for the academic success of multilingual learners by including ELL progress as a component of the accountability system

2009

SHIFT: STUDENT STRENGTHS

Ofelia Garcia popularized the term emergent bilingual as a way of shifting emphasis to these students’ emergent strengths (Garcia).

2010

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

Adopted by 41 states, the CCSS created opportunities to explicitly connect the teaching of English Language Development with content standards

2015

EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT (ESSA)

Created shifts:

- State-level uniform process for identifying, assigning services, and exiting services
- Build English proficiency rates into accountability framework for Title I
- Reinforced emphasis on subgroup accountability

2017

P-12 DUAL LANGUAGE INITIATIVE IN WASHINGTON

OSPI launches the Dual Language Initiative with the goal of all students having access to dual language by 2030. The Initiative prioritizes multilingual learners for dual language to prevent/close opportunity gaps.

TERMINOLOGY

The timelines and tables below show: the evolution of asset-based terminology, with each date approximating the time when each term was first popularized; recommended person-first, asset-based terminology; suggestions for how to shift engrained thinking with regard to terms and labels; deficit-based terminology that can and should be retired from use; clarifications of terms whose connotations are situational; and meanings of less commonly used terms.

TIMELINE DEMONSTRATING THE EVOLUTION OF ASSET-BASED TERMINOLOGY

DEFICIT-BASED

1960S

- New Non-English Proficient (NEP)
- Limited English Proficient (LEP)
- English as a Second Language (ESL)

2001

- English Learners (EL)
- English Language Learner (ELL)

ASSET-BASED

2009

- Emergent Bilingual (EB)
- Emergent Multilingual (EM)

TODAY

- **Multilingual (ML)**
 - Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD)
- Learner of English as an Additional Language (EAL)
- Language Learner (LL)

RECOMMENDED ASSET-BASED TERMINOLOGY

TERM

Multilingual

DEFINITION

- Refers to students/learners in all stages of language acquisition
- Recognizes potential for fluency in:
 - 2+ languages simultaneously
 - Productive (writing/speaking) and receptive (listening/reading) facets
- References known languages as learning resources

E.g., A multilingual student might be fluent in Spanish, acquiring their family's indigenous language, and acquiring English.

Please Note: There are times when individuals and organizations will need to distinguish between MLs actively receiving and those not qualifying for EL services; in such circumstances, consider using the phrasing "Multilinguals qualifying for Active EL services."

TERMINOLOGY – CONTINUED

ADDITIONAL ASSET-BASED TERMINOLOGY (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

TERM
Bilingual

DEFINITION

- Refers to students/learners in all stages of language acquisition and recognizes potential for fluency in:
 - 2 languages simultaneously
 - Productive (writing/speaking) and receptive (listening/reading) facets
- References first languages as a learning resource

E.g., A Bilingual student who is fluent in Spanish and acquiring their family's indigenous language.

TERM
Culturally and linguistically diverse

DEFINITION

- Differs from the mainstream culture
- Reflects ethnic, cultural, and linguistic assets of students and families

I.e., collectivist vs. individualist cultures, pictorial vs. alphabetic languages

(Webster and Lu 83-94)

TERM
Emergent bilingual

DEFINITION

- Describes a student/learner who is becoming bilingual (acquiring a second language)
- Students have the ability to tap into both languages as resources
- Reflects students' potential in developing bilingualism

TERM
Emergent multilingual

DEFINITION

- Describes a student/learner who is becoming multilingual (acquiring a second or additional languages)
- Reflects students' potential in developing multilingualism

(Garcia 1)

TERM
Learner of English as an Additional Language

DEFINITION

- Emphasizes the student/learner, not their language(s)
- Encompasses students who speak 2 or more languages and recognizes potential for fluency in:
 - 2+ languages simultaneously
 - Productive (writing/speaking) and receptive (listening/reading) facets
- References known languages as learning resources

(Webster and Lu 83-94)

TERMINOLOGY – CONTINUED

DEFICIT-BASED TERMINOLOGY TO RETIRE

TERMINOLOGY

- English Learner
- English Language Learner
- Limited English Proficient
- Non English Proficient
- English as a Second Language Student

WHY IS IT DEFICIT-BASED?

- Focuses on what students are lacking
- Has been used inappropriately to indicate students who need remediation
- Does not recognize the linguistic assets of students
- Promotes a deficit-based narrative of multilingual students
- Implies English is best or first
- Some students are acquiring English as an additional language while already having acquired several other languages

ASSET-BASED REPLACEMENT

Multilingual learner and/or student

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SHIFTING TO ASSET-BASED LANGUAGE

INSTEAD OF USING LEVELS OF PROFICIENCY TO LABEL STUDENTS...

USE PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE THAT USES SKILLS AND ABILITIES AS DESCRIPTORS

Level 1

A multilingual student who is currently performing at a Level 1 in _____ (Reading/Writing/Speaking/Listening)

Emerging Student

A multilingual student who is

- E.g., currently a Newcomer to the country
- E.g., currently performing at an Emerging or Entering level based on assessment data

TERMINOLOGY – CONTINUED

CLARIFICATIONS OF COMMONLY MISUSED TERMS¹

TERMINOLOGY

Monolingual

COMMON MISUSE

- Negative connotation for students whose language is other than English

ACCURATE DEFINITION

Any student who speaks or uses only one language (“Monolingual”)

TERMINOLOGY

Newcomer and
Recently arrived
Multilingual Learner

COMMON MISUSE

- Used in reference to any student with Emerging proficiency on any language proficiency assessment

ACCURATE DEFINITION

“Newcomers” refers to any foreign-born students and their families who have recently arrived in the United States (“Newcomer Toolkit”)

TERMINOLOGY

Long-Term English
Learner

COMMON MISUSE

- Label for students based on a plateau or lack of annual growth on a language proficiency assessment
- Label for elementary students who have received language development programming for less than five years
- Label for students who are Progressing in their language development but are taking longer than 5 years² to reach proficiency

ACCURATE DEFINITION

Students who(se):

- Have been eligible for English language development instruction for five or more years
- MLs who are not receiving the support they need

¹Important Note: These terms are often misused in a deficit manner; understanding the accurate meaning leads to an asset-based perspective

²In “A National Study of School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students’ Long-Term Academic Achievement” Thomas and Collier determined that the average length of time that it takes multilingual students to reach proficiency in English is 5-7 years when students have 2-3 years of L1 instruction and 7-10 years when students don’t have instruction in their first language(s).

TERMINOLOGY – CONTINUED

LESSER-KNOWN TERMS: IMPORTANT DISTINCTIONS FOR SUBGROUPS OF MULTILINGUALS

TERMINOLOGY

Students with Limited and/or Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE/SLIFE)

DEFINITION

Umbrella term used to describe a diverse subset of the multilinguals who share several unifying characteristics such as:

- Usually new to the U.S. school system
- Had interrupted or limited schooling opportunities in their native country
- Limited backgrounds in reading and writing in their native language(s)
- Below grade level in most academic skills

(Freeman and Freeman)

TERMINOLOGY

Sequential bilingual/multilingual

DEFINITION

Students who have developed one language and are acquiring another language

(Beeman and Urow 154)

TERMINOLOGY

Simultaneous bilingual/multilingual

DEFINITION

Students exposed to two languages from birth

(Beeman and Urow)

TERMINOLOGY

Heritage Language Learners

DEFINITION

- Students studying a language who have some proficiency in, or a cultural connection to, that language through family, community, or country of origin
- Heritage language learners have widely diverse levels of proficiency in the language (in terms of oral proficiency and literacy) and of connections to the language and culture

(“Heritage Languages in America”)

TERMINOLOGY

Dually Qualified Students

DEFINITION

- Some multilinguals qualify for English Language services in addition to special education services
- Person-first language continues to be important when describing the services students qualify for and receive

It should be noted that multilinguals continue to be over-referred to special education services; carefully, intentionally designed referral processes are crucial to shifting this inequity.

NEXT STEPS AND FURTHER LEARNING

The action steps below are applicable to policy makers, school system leaders, principals, and teachers.

NEXT STEPS AND FURTHER LEARNING		
<p>PRINCIPLES Reflect and Learn</p>	<p>ACTION STEPS Research and deepen learning around the history of language loss and policies in the U.S.</p>	<p>DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR TEAMS What was new to you when you read the historical framing section?</p>
	<p>Reflect on the language that is currently used to represent multilingual students.</p>	<p>What spoken and written language is currently used to represent multilingual students in your context?</p>
	<p>Reflect on the impact deficit-based language may have had on multilingual students, families, and communities in your school or district.</p>	<p>Are you currently using a term due to adult convenience or because it accurately describes a student’s needs?</p>
	<p>Consider the social and emotional impact of both asset- and deficit-based language.</p>	<p>How does the adoption of asset-based language honor the SEL work of your organization?</p>
	<p>Learn more about the languages, country of origin, and heritage of your students and families.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where are our multilingual students from? • What languages do they speak? • What cultures, values and traditions do our multilingual students bring with them?
	<p>Learn more about the language acquisition process and the services/supports available to support multilingual students.</p>	<p>What additional learning, unlearning or training needs to be done to understand language acquisition and multilingual students from an asset-based perspective?</p>
<p>PRINCIPLES Review and Update</p>	<p>ACTION STEPS Review and update current communications, policy documents, curricular materials and lesson plans to reflect asset-based language.</p>	<p>DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR TEAMS How might you update publications in your context to reflect asset-based, person-first language?</p>
	<p>Create intentional spaces to collaborate with multilingual students, families, communities in reviewing existing practices.</p>	<p>In what ways can you partner with community members and families as you revisit key materials?</p>
<p>PRINCIPLES Model and Share</p>	<p>ACTION STEPS Interrupt deficit-based language by recasting and rephrasing it as it occurs.</p>	<p>DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR TEAMS Where do I have the opportunity to portray strengths-based narratives about multilingual students through the language that I use?</p>
	<p>Acknowledge asset-based language as it is used appropriately.</p>	
	<p>Be open to continued learning and growth; as you “know better, do better,” (Maya Angelou).</p>	
	<p>Model the use of person-first and asset-based terminology in professional learning, conversations with your colleagues and in staff meetings.</p>	
	<p>Share this document with your colleagues.</p>	

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