

Considerations for English Learners at Risk for Dyslexia

Dyslexia, a specific type of learning disability, affects individuals in all cultures and languages. While home language may impact how characteristics of dyslexia present, English Learners (ELs) can still be identified as having characteristics of dyslexia. However, because it can be difficult to determine whether the literacy needs of students who are learning English as an additional language are the result of ongoing language development or of a learning disability, ELs may experience delayed, over-, or under-identification of disabilities. This resource guide addresses important considerations for the successful identification and monitoring of students who are both multilingual ELs and at risk for learning disabilities, including dyslexia.

Supporting English Learners (ELs) Using a Multi-Tiered System of Supports

A Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is intended to support ALL students, and it is considered best practice for teaching and learning (refer to GaDOE's [A Family Guide to Understanding MTSS](#) for more information). Tier I (core) instruction should be designed to build upon the strengths and meet the needs of all students, including ELs. Research shows that ELs benefit from instruction in all tiers that is focused on the five essential components of reading as outlined by the [Report of the National Reading Panel](#), as well as the component of oral language development highlighted by the [Report of the National Literacy Panel for Language Minority Children and Youth](#). ELs are entitled to English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) services and must be provided such services in accordance with federal and state law. In Georgia, this includes systematic, explicit, and sustained English language instruction (called ESOL), as well as access to grade-level content. Some ELs may also be eligible for [special education services](#) and must be provided such services in accordance with federal and state laws.



Multitiered system of supports for English learners: Literacy implementation rubric

[This rubric from Project LEE](#) is intended to be used by individuals or teams who are responsible for monitoring school-level fidelity of a multitiered system of supports (MTSS) for ELs, including MTSS, bilingual, literacy, and English language development specialists or coaches; school principals; and teacher leaders.

The rubric is aligned with the essential components of MTSS for literacy and the infrastructure that is necessary for successful implementation. It is accompanied by a worksheet and action planning document with guiding questions.



Early universal reading and dyslexia screening is the first step within MTSS toward preventing reading difficulties. According to the Georgia Early Literacy and Dyslexia Act ([H.B. 307](#)), early reading and dyslexia screeners should be administered to all K-3 students, including ELs. Educators should not wait until students' oral language proficiency is fully developed to screen ELs. Screening enables schools to determine who needs additional support in reading and then provide them with evidence-based interventions to address their reading development needs. In Georgia, there is no minimum English proficiency level prerequisite before screening students for reading difficulties, including characteristics of dyslexia. However, students' language proficiency should be considered when interpreting the results of the screener.

Screening English Learners for Characteristics of Dyslexia

Per the Georgia Early Literacy and Dyslexia Act ([H.B. 307](#)), all K-3 students must be screened using a universal reading and dyslexia screener three times per year. The universal screener measures foundational literacy skills and assist school-based teams in identifying characteristics of dyslexia. School districts must use screeners from state-approved lists of [universal reading and dyslexia screeners](#).



Sources of Data for Identifying ELs at Risk of Dyslexia

Schools could gather and use information from a variety of sources to identify ELs at risk of dyslexia. These sources may include, but are not limited to:

- Universal screening
- Dyslexia screening
- Classroom observations
- Student/family interviews
- Informal assessments
- Home language surveys
- Parent-teacher meetings
- Student work samples
- Level of English language proficiency

Schools should consider universal reading and dyslexia screening information (see Georgia's [Characteristics of Dyslexia Rubric](#)) along with other sources of data on students' language and literacy development to identify students at risk for dyslexia. Some of these data, such as information from the WIDA ACCESS language proficiency assessments, are required by federal and state laws. WIDA ACCESS is used to determine the English language proficiency levels and language progress of ELs in the domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and can help educators rule out low vocabulary knowledge in English.

Schools should also gather and use information from other data sources in addition to standardized screening and progress monitoring assessment

measures. These may include classroom observations in multiple settings (within general education and ESOL classrooms or during small group instruction/intervention), interviews with students and families, informal assessments, home language surveys, parent-teacher meetings, and student work or performance samples. It is critical to understand what a student can do while also identifying areas of concern.

Richard Woods, Georgia's School Superintendent

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Below are examples of additional considerations for understanding the language and literacy needs of ELs to help guide decision-making:

- Is there a history of academic and/or language difficulties in the family?
- Is there a history of dyslexia or reading difficulties in the family?
- Did the student exhibit language delays in their primary language?
- When compared to peers with similar background and English language proficiency level, is the EL student's progress typical or not?
- If the student attended school in another country, is there a history of academic concerns in the country of origin?

Distinguishing Between Lack of English Proficiency and Reading Difficulties

As ELs acquire a new language with the support of high-quality instruction, they develop skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Along the way, students make errors in vocabulary, syntax, grammar, spelling, and pronunciation that are typical for their English proficiency level and may relate to cross-linguistic transfer (see [Effective Practices for English Learners](#)). These errors tend to decrease as they make progress in language acquisition. However, there are also signs that may indicate when a student is experiencing reading difficulties *beyond* the developmentally appropriate process of second language acquisition. These indicators could serve as the basis for timely assessment and/or intervention. Both types of errors are summarized in the table below.

Typical EL Language Errors	Atypical EL Language Errors
Examples of typical language errors that may be seen as ELs acquire a new language include: • Applying sounds or phonetic spellings from their native language when writing in English. • Comprehension issues resulting from the ongoing process of building vocabulary and background knowledge as they are learning two languages. • Difficulty using context clues provided by unknown words or challenging sentence structures. • Decoding difficulties when learning words that contain sounds or correspondences different from their native language. • Low confidence or limited expressive language presenting as reluctance, a "silent period," or a challenge in sharing knowledge and understanding.	Key signs that may indicate difficulties beyond those associated with language acquisition and a need for follow-up include: • Persistent problems in word reading (word recognition, decoding), reading fluency, and spelling, especially when observed with both home language and English. • Persistent and pervasive difficulties despite consistent and targeted reading instruction. • Not making the same progress as other students with similar linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. • Demonstrating better comprehension when listening than when reading for comprehension. • Not showing increased understanding of written text as general language knowledge develops. • Experiencing difficulties in all languages spoken. • Having more difficulties than siblings or peers with similar language backgrounds.



Instruction and Intervention for English Learners with Characteristics of Dyslexia

First and foremost, educators must ensure ELs learn the meaning of words in English. Attention to meaning making and oral comprehension must be incorporated into explicit reading instruction. A focus on vocabulary and oral language development is critical in this process, as it allows ELs to connect their knowledge in their home language and English to phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, and specific decoding skills.

ELs with characteristics of dyslexia typically struggle with distinguishing and isolating sounds in their native language and in English, so they will require intensive, explicit, and systematic reading instruction. Educators should explicitly teach all phonemes of English, and pay particular attention to those that are not part of a learner's primary language or dialect. ELs at risk of reading difficulties have the most significant challenges with developing word reading and spelling skills and thus require systematic instruction in phonological awareness and spelling; without it, they may continue to struggle. Lesson activities that address these skills include:

- counting, segmenting, and blending syllables
- segmenting and blending words
- comparing and matching sounds
- identifying sounds with visual cues
- teaching meaning of words used in phonological awareness activities.

English is considered a complex alphabetic writing system due to the depth of its spelling system (i.e., multiple combinations of letters can represent the same speech sounds) and its use of complex syllable structures. This complexity causes it to take longer to learn to read in English than it does in languages with simpler spelling systems and syllables. Students will need to be explicitly taught the differences in sounds and learn effective decoding strategies for learning English words. However, they will also need to be taught irregular words that are exceptions to the rule.

The same evidence-based practices used to teach reading to their English-only peers with characteristics of dyslexia are also effective for ELs with characteristics of dyslexia. Systematic instruction focused on developing students' word-level reading skills is critical for all students with characteristics of dyslexia. Practices to improve word reading involve spelling and morphology exercises that focus on suffixes and prefixes, word sorts, and spelling patterns. ELs also need explicit instruction on building both academic vocabulary and everyday words their English-only peers already know. Teachers will need to provide intensive, explicit, systematic, and cumulative foundational reading skills instruction for students to learn these skills, typically beginning with words students understand.



Frequently Asked Questions

(adapted from [Pearson: Dyslexia and English Language Learners](#))

Q. Should ELs be screened for dyslexia?

A. Yes. The goal of any screener is to sort reliably individuals who are “at risk” vs. those who are “not at risk.” Any positive screening result, whether a student who is classified as EL or not, should be followed by further assessment measure(s) and consideration of relevant qualitative data (see above, p. 3) to establish whether the student has characteristics of dyslexia. In the case of a student who is an EL, if characteristics of dyslexia are identified, they will present in English and in the student’s primary language(s).

Q. Should dyslexia screening focus on students’ academic performance in their primary or secondary languages?

A. Literacy (reading and writing) assessments should be conducted in the language(s) of instruction. As an example, if a student lives in a bilingual home but has only received reading instruction in English, then we only assess their literacy skills in English. If a student has received literacy instruction in two or more languages, we would assess their reading skills in either their dominant language or in more than one language, as necessary.

Q. What factors should be considered for multilingual ELs in the context of literacy and dyslexia?

A. Coordinated language instruction and intervention supports overall linguistic development. Considering all general and bilingual education assessment data, as well as any special education involvement, offers a clearer picture of an EL’s language performance. Key areas to assess include word identification, nonsense word decoding, reading fluency, spelling, a comparison of listening and reading comprehension, and phonological processing (including phonological awareness, phonological memory, and rapid automatic naming).

Q. What is a recommended number of minutes in the daily literacy block to devote specifically to oral language development for English learners in grades K-3?

A: A core literacy block in grades PreK–3 should allocate time for the three main components: Foundational Skills, Engaging with Complex Text, and Writing. Oral language, a bedrock of literacy, develops throughout all three components. [Research](#) suggests that separate English language development (ELD) results in greater percentages of instructional time devoted to oral language, which promotes higher English oral language and literacy among ELs.



Q. Do we need to complete a Tiered Reading Support Plan and/or a Characteristics of Dyslexia Support Plan for multilingual ELs?

A: Yes, a Tiered Reading Support Plan is required for all students who have been identified as having a significant reading deficiency in accordance with the [Georgia Reading and Dyslexia Screening Process \(Flowchart\)](#) and the Georgia Literacy Act (H.B. 538). A Characteristics of Dyslexia Support Plan is required for all students who have received tiered interventions in accordance with the [Georgia Reading and Dyslexia Screening Process \(Flowchart\)](#) and have been determined to have characteristics of dyslexia using the [Characteristics of Dyslexia Rubric](#).

Q. What are some [best practices](#) when screening EL students for characteristics of dyslexia?

A. Valid and accurate screening of ELs at risk for dyslexia will include the following best practices:

- Ensure screener instruments have been validated to identify dyslexia among various student groups, including ELs.
- The screening process includes multiple measures.
- Screening and assessment are embedded within strong Tier I instruction with linguistically sustaining MTSS support.
- Results from multiple measures are carefully interpreted and applied.

Q. What are some questions to help us explore further considerations for EL students?

A. Here are some questions to get you started:

1. What does the student's home language survey tell you about the primary language spoken in the home by adults, by children, and by the student?
2. What is the student's current level of ELP in their primary language and in English?
3. What do the WIDA ACCESS assessment score results and progress monitoring data explain about the student's language needs and responsiveness to intervention?
4. How long has the student been in the U.S. schools?
5. Has the student's formal education been interrupted? If yes, what were the circumstances and how might that affect the student's responsiveness to intervention?
6. Are there family traditions, knowledge, or linguistic assets that can be used to strengthen the student's engagement and success in the intervention?



7. Are there additional factors related to the student's out-of-school experiences, such as the way they arrived in the U.S., that may have an impact on their progress?
8. What additional English language instruction does the student currently receive?

The table below provides additional resources for screening, instruction, and intervention for ELs. Note that although universal reading and dyslexia screening is required for K–3 students in Georgia, resources specific to older grades are also included in the resources provided below.

If you would like to...	Then you can refer to...
Review a framework for foundational literacy skills instruction for English learners and support the implementation of your school district's universal dyslexia screening for ELs	Council of the Great City Schools' Publications : <i>A Framework for Foundational Literacy Skills Instruction for English Learners</i> and <i>District considerations for Universal Dyslexia Screening: Ensuring Appropriate Implementation and Instruction for English Learners</i>
Support teachers who are instructing emergent bilingual students who may also be at risk for dyslexia	Texas Education Agency's Cross-Reference Checklist for Emergent Bilingual Students at Risk for Dyslexia .
Connect the Science of Reading to teaching English Learners/Emergent Bilinguals	Primary Considerations for Educators and Educational Leaders Supporting English Learners/Emergent Bilinguals (ELs/EBs) repository for a curated list of reading research on how best to teach English learners and emergent bilingual students.
Learn ways to use assessment data to improve instruction	RTI for English Language Learners: Appropriately Using Screening and Progress Monitoring Tools to Improve Instructional Outcomes for guidance on using of screening and progress monitoring data for ELs.
Identify multilingual English Learners with specific learning disabilities	WIDA: Identifying ELLs With Specific Learning Disabilities for facts, advice, and resources for school teams; and "Considerations for English Language Learners" from the RTI Action Network: RTI-Based SLD Identification Toolkit for guidance on teams, parent participation, determination of Tier 1, 2, 3, assessment effectiveness, and comparison of populations to normative samples.



Learn about reading intervention practices for multilingual English Learners	Evidence-Based Practices in the Treatment of Reading Disabilities Among English Learners Texas Center for Learning Disabilities (texasldcenter.org) for recommendations for instruction for ELs with reading difficulties.
Identify considerations for multilingual English Learners within Response to Intervention	RTI: Considerations for English Language Learners (ELLs) for considerations for data-based decision making.
Find evidence-based Tier 2 intervention practices for multilingual English Learners	Evidence-Based Tier 2 Intervention Practices for English Learners for interventions that support the language and literacy needs of ELs in Grades 3–5, specifically through supplemental intervention (Tier 2).
Read about Tier 3 practice recommendations for multilingual English Learners with significant learning difficulties or disabilities	English Learners With Significant Learning Difficulties or Disabilities: Recommendations for Practice for effective interventions (Tier 3) and decision-making for ELs with significant learning difficulties or disabilities.
Foster collaborative partnerships with families of multilingual English Learners within a multi-tiered system of supports	Fostering Collaborative Partnerships With Families of English Learners Within a Multitiered System of Supports for guidance on collaborative home-school partnerships with parents and families as partners within a multitiered system of support for ELs.
Learn culturally and linguistically sustaining practices in classrooms	Supporting Culturally and Linguistically Sustaining Practices (DESE) for information about culturally and linguistically sustaining practices; and resources for professional development.

