

The Science of Reading and Multilingual Learners: Language Comprehension is Central

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Theoretical models and empirical evidence underscore that English reading comprehension—the goal of reading—is a complex developmental process for all students, whether already proficient in academic English or in the process of acquiring academic English proficiency (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018; Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Kittle, Amendum, & Budde, 2024; Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2010; Scarborough, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). As a complex developmental process, English reading comprehension requires the coordination of multiple interrelated skills and unfolds over time. Without minimizing the importance of other skills, there is wide consensus that students must be able to read the printed words that appear in text (i.e., word reading) and understand the meanings of the printed words they read (i.e., language comprehension) (Mancilla-Martinez, Hwang, & Oh, 2021).

Yet, for decades, it has been the case that just 1 in 3 school-age US students can read at or above the proficiency level (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2024a, 2024b). Among students from homes where a language other than only English is used and who are in the process of acquiring academic English proficiency—referred to as Multilingual Learner (MLL) students—just 1 in 10 students in grade 4 and 1 in 20 students in grade 8 can read at or above the proficiency level (NCES, 2024a, 2024b). These persistent findings highlight the national opportunity to support reading comprehension skills during the school-age years, contributing to lifelong benefits, including improved health (Berkman et al., 2011), higher school completion rates (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004), and increased job prospects (Kickbusch, 2001). While there are no simple answers to this long-standing conundrum, taking stock of the wealth of research on reading and its development is a sensible approach toward supporting US students' reading achievement.

Fortunately, empirically based evidence drawn from an interdisciplinary body of research amassed over decades—referred to as the Science of Reading (SOR)—emphasizes that it is essential to ensure all students are provided with the instructional support they need in both word reading and language comprehension for successful reading comprehension (The Reading League, 2022). In this paper, we focus on Multilingual Learner (MLL) students, given their already large and growing representation across the nation coupled with their lower English reading comprehension rates relative to their English-proficient peers. We discuss the applicability of the SOR in general and the role of language comprehension in particular for MLL students' reading comprehension success.

Multilingual Learner Students in the United States

Nearly twelve million (over 15 percent) US school-age students come from homes where a language other than only English is spoken (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.). Of those students, just over five million (over 10 percent) are formally identified as English learners (i.e., students in the process of developing academic English proficiency). “English learners,” or “ELs,” is the term used for federal accountability purposes, but here we refer to this heterogeneous student population as “MLL students.” We do so to highlight the fact that this student population effectively has access to one or more other languages, rather than solely focusing on their development of English language skills.

The MLL student identification process is complex but starts with a Home Language Survey. A parent or legal guardian is asked to complete a Home Language Survey at their child's school entry, so that schools can identify students who are exposed to a language other than English in the home (US Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition, 2016). If a language besides English is indicated on the Home Language Survey, students are flagged as potentially having limited academic English language proficiency. These students are administered an academic English language proficiency screener to determine eligibility for academic English language support services. Students who do not pass the academic language proficiency screener are eligible to receive academic English language support services. These MLL students are then assessed on an annual basis to determine if they have developed the requisite academic English proficiency to be reclassified as English-proficient. Academic English language proficiency screeners require that students have mastery of academic language structures, including subject-specific vocabulary, syntax, and discourse-level comprehension. In other words, proficiency in conversational English is insufficient (Mancilla-Martinez, Ahn, & Joshi, in press).



Despite the English instructional context of most MLL students (NCES, 2024c), roughly 1 in 3 students do not get reclassified as English-proficient after more than five years in US schools (NCELA, 2024). Indeed, national data consistently find limited English academic success, including English reading comprehension, among students in the process of acquiring academic English proficiency (e.g., Mancilla-Martinez, 2020; NCES, 2024a, 2024b). But speaking other languages is not a risk factor for compromised academic achievement (Mancilla-Martinez, 2020). Race/ethnicity and income, among other intersecting sociocultural and instructional factors, individually influence students' opportunities to learn and, in turn, likelihood of reading comprehension success. For MLL students, intersecting identities represent multiplicative risk factors for compromised reading comprehension, with poverty as an established risk factor for a wide array of negative life outcomes for decades (Duncan & Hoynes, 2021). Not only do MLL students disproportionately live in or near poverty, but they also generally attend under-resourced, segregated schools where they are taught by underprepared teachers with lower rates of certification, fewer years of teaching experience, and limited experience working with MLL students (Samson & Lesaux, 2009). In brief, language status represents a complex factor that is intertwined with poverty and race/ethnicity, as well as differential access to educational opportunities in the United States.

Indeed, although similar factors influence English reading comprehension among MLL students and those already proficient in English, namely word reading and language comprehension, MLL students continue to evidence English reading comprehension rates that are lower relative to their English-proficient peers. Because MLL students are still in the process of developing academic English language proficiency, it may seem unsurprising that many MLL students also have lower English reading comprehension outcomes. Too often, low reading comprehension among MLL students is positioned as stemming directly from their language status. In this line of reasoning, students from English-only homes would be expected to encounter few, if any, academic struggles simply because they are English monolingual. However, students from English-only homes encounter significant reading challenges, and this has been the case for decades (Hussar et al., 2020). It is thus critical to understand the difference between students' English language development and their English language comprehension, as this has important implications for supporting their English reading achievement.

Language Development vs. Language Comprehension

In the simplest terms and as the name implies, language development is broad and refers to the process of *developing language skills* (e.g., nonverbal communication, first sounds, first words),



receptively and expressively. Though language comprehension is also a broad construct, we focus on its conceptualization in reading theory and research. In this context, language comprehension refers to students' ability to *comprehend written language*. The key distinction to underscore is thus that students who are proficient in English still require targeted support in developing English language comprehension in the service of English reading comprehension. This means MLL students must develop academic English language skills and simultaneously comprehend English academic written language for successful English reading comprehension.

The goal of academic English language services (i.e., EL services) is to support MLL students' English language development so that students can access all content areas in English. The goal is not to specifically support English reading comprehension. For this reason, in addition to broad language development support, explicit attention to language comprehension in the context of reading comprehension instruction is non-negotiable for MLL students. Indeed, results from a meta-analysis on children struggling with reading comprehension found that MLL students struggle with language comprehension significantly more than their English-proficient peers (Spencer & Wagner, 2017). In summary, academic English language services are necessary for MLL students, but they are insufficient for successful English reading comprehension outcomes as language comprehension support is also required.

Language Comprehension is Integral for Reading Comprehension

The Simple View of Reading (SVR; Gough & Tunmer, 1986) and the Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001) frameworks have been influential for decades. Both spotlight the non-negotiable role of word reading and language comprehension for successful reading comprehension—the *goal* of reading at every point in development. As noted, the SOR is anchored in amassed, empirically based evidence drawn from an interdisciplinary body of research, converging with the SVR and Reading Rope frameworks on the importance of word reading and language comprehension instructional support for successful reading comprehension (The Reading League, 2022). Yet, misconceptions of the SOR as a sterile, recipe-like, skill-and-drill, and phonics-only approach to teaching reading persist. Within this narrow view, the critical role of language comprehension is nonexistent even though it is a clearly articulated target area. This is at least partly due to the preponderance of phonics-centered assessments that may result in an uneven emphasis on phonics-centered instruction (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2017; Spencer & Wagner, 2017). Indeed, in 2010, Dickinson, Golinkoff, and Hirsh-Pasek warned that the limited evidence base for language comprehension interventions might lead schools to default to prioritizing word reading skills at the expense of



language development. Gaps in intervention evidence can influence instructional priorities, inadvertently disadvantaging students most in need of language comprehension support (e.g., MLL students, students at risk for or with language-based disabilities).

It is also the case that the scarcity of language comprehension assessments limits instructional efforts in this area. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive review of assessment limitations; assessing language comprehension is complicated for multiple reasons, including variation in how this construct is conceptualized and operationalized. For MLL students who have linguistic knowledge in more than one language, it is essential to recognize that they have linguistic knowledge in another language(s), not only in English. Yet, English-only measures continue to be the primary way by which reading comprehension difficulties are identified among MLL students (Spencer & Wagner, 2017).

Fortunately, research reveals that it may be possible to identify MLL students who later struggle with English reading comprehension based on low language comprehension skills during the primary grades, despite age-appropriate word reading skills (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2010, 2017). This pattern demonstrates the importance of *assessing* MLL students' language comprehension early on. Without a concerted effort to ensure that language comprehension is prioritized and becomes a standard component of school-based assessment for all students, our knowledge base on how best to support students' language comprehension development for successful reading comprehension will remain sorely limited.

Explicit and Integrated Language Comprehension Development Support

There are several promising approaches to supporting MLL students' language comprehension skills even though assessments in this area remain limited. Below we describe two research-based approaches that embed instructional strategies often used in isolation.

- *Integrate Language Interactions and Language Discourse:* Do not assume MLL students will develop language comprehension skills if they receive academic English language support services (i.e., EL services). In addition to oral language interactions that facilitate access to meaning, explicit attention to oral language discourse is needed. For example, an interactive read-aloud (a common strategy) can facilitate oral retelling, supporting meaning-making. Following the interactive read-aloud, narrative text structure can be explicitly targeted using



sequence cards or chain-of-events story maps (also common strategies) to more intentionally support reading comprehension.

- *Approach Vocabulary as a Conceptual Package:* Vocabulary instruction is one of the most common instructional strategies to extend students' language comprehension skills. But isolated word lists should be avoided in favor of conceptually related word sets that have stronger potential to help students build background knowledge for reading comprehension. Vocabulary that relates to the same idea helps deepen conceptual understanding and leverages cross-linguistic connections. For example, a focus on informational texts can target vocabulary words such as describe, detail, and explain, as they are all conceptually related words about providing information/explaining ideas. Furthermore, MLL students from Spanish-speaking homes may possess linguistic knowledge they can leverage by directly attending to the cognates *describir*, *detalle*, and *explicar*.

Conclusion

The goal of reading—comprehension—is the same for all students, whether already proficient in English or in the process of developing academic English language proficiency. All students must be supported to develop word reading and language comprehension skills in the service of reading comprehension. However, the amount of support and the intensity of the support will depend on individual student needs. Compared to word reading, language comprehension is an area in which most US students can use additional support. This is especially the case for MLL students as they are in the process of developing English language proficiency and simultaneously charged with acquiring the language skills to support reading. It is thus imperative to ensure students are afforded opportunities for sustained, structured language discourse that explicitly targets language structures that support reading comprehension. The available scientific evidence demonstrates that writing about material read or presented in class results in improvements in comprehension and retention of such material (Harris et al., 2023). Learning through reading to learn and then writing across multiple tasks and genres becomes a fundamental tool for educating children.



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