

Supporting literacy development of multilingual language learners with limited or interrupted education

Natasha Faroogh

York University, Toronto, Canada

Joy Jones

York University, Toronto, Canada

Munise Gültekin¹

York University, Toronto, Canada

Abstract: As more migrants enter Ontario's education systems, supporting new students learning English becomes increasingly important. Multilingual Language Learners (MLLs) come from a variety of backgrounds and have diverse needs. Of this group, adolescent migrants whose families have been forcibly displaced are a particularly vulnerable population who face unique educational challenges in English literacy development, especially if they are students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE). This lack of access to formal education may result in relatively limited literacy skills in adolescent MLLs' first language(s). This paper reviews literature on relevant frameworks to literacy development; analyzes empirical and conceptual studies on MLLs' literacy development; and offers pedagogical practices that can help facilitate adolescent MLLs' reading development in English. The paper concludes with recommendations for future research to optimize adolescent MLLs' integration and success into the public education system.

Keywords: *multilingual language learners; students with limited or interrupted formal education; sociocultural theory; interactive model of reading; translanguaging pedagogy; literacy development*

1 SLIFE definition and situated context

1.1 Introduction

As more migrants enter Ontario's education systems, supporting new students learning English becomes increasingly important. Many of these students are Multilingual Language Learners (MLLs), a term which recognizes that students already know multiple languages, dialects, and/or varieties, working to develop their competencies in English and other languages concurrently. MLLs come from a variety of backgrounds and have diverse needs. Of this group, adolescent migrants who have been forcibly displaced are a particularly vulnerable population facing unique educational challenges in English literacy development, especially if they are students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE). This lack of previous formal education may result in relatively limited literacy skills in adolescent MLLs' first language(s).

¹ *Corresponding Author: munise@yorku.ca*

Through the lens of Sociocultural Theory and social constructivist learning, this paper reviews the literature on relevant frameworks for literacy development, including the Interactive Reading Model, Translanguaging Pedagogy, and the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm, analyzing empirical and conceptual studies on MLLs' literacy development to offer pedagogical practices for facilitating adolescent MLLs' reading development in English. In this paper, we propose that the integration of aspects from multiple pedagogical frameworks improves literacy outcomes for adolescent MLLs, particularly those who are SLIFE. The paper concludes with recommendations for future research for optimizing adolescent MLLs' integration into the public education system and scaffolding success with literacy development.

1.2 Programs currently in place in Ontario

Students who have experienced forced displacement and migration have distinct needs from students whose families have voluntarily migrated; however, their needs are unfortunately often conflated with all students who are labelled MLLs and placed in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs (Van Viegen, 2020). As the focus of this paper is MLLs who are also SLIFE, we use the term SLIFE MLLs in recognition of the unique challenges of this group. Ontario offers two programs for SLIFE MLLs in high school. While all MLLs are given an initial assessment test (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007a), SLIFE MLLs are usually placed in the English Literacy Development (ELD) program pending availability. After progressing through the 5 levels of ELD, SLIFE MLLs then follow a 4-level ESL program (with an optional 5th level) before being placed in mainstream workplace, college, or university preparatory English classes (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007b). Unfortunately, however, the foundational ELD programs are not always available, or ELD programs may be combined with ESL classes. Furthermore, SLIFE MLLs are also required to take at least one and up to three mainstream courses per semester following Ontario's integration policy for all MLLs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007a).

Therefore, supporting students' literacy development within mainstream classrooms is paramount. The first step to implementing differentiated instruction for SLIFE MLLs is to recognize that they experience unique challenges with literacy needs distinct from other MLLs; furthermore, all teachers, regardless of subject and literacy training, are also required to integrate SLIFE MLLs into their classes and support their development of academic reading skills.

2 Theoretical frameworks

2.1 Sociocultural theory and MLLs' experiences

Sociocultural Theory (SCT) provides a useful framework for conceptualizing SLIFE MLL adolescents and their literacy development in the Canadian education context. Similar to previous authors, this paper views SCT as a cornerstone of constructivist pedagogy, in which knowledge and understanding are socially co-constructed through the development of higher-order thinking, experiential learning, and collaborative inquiry (Cummins et al., 2011). Although SLIFE MLLs may have minimal L1 print literacy and academic knowledge, they bring other skills developed in the context of their ontogenetic experiences (i.e., an individual's collective lifelong experiences and development). However, these skills and real-life experiences developed through other societal contexts may not align with central expectations in Western secondary school classrooms (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011), particularly the privileging of print literacy over oracy and the focus on abstract academic content and schemata of scientific concepts; in addition, SLIFE MLLs' emotional and cognitive life histories may provoke cultural dissonance and cognitive fatigue when they are first immersed in Western learning norms (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2016), and SLIFE MLLs may exert their agency by withdrawing participation if left in unsupportive classroom

conditions with community rules and roles they do not understand or value (Swain et al., 2015). To support SLIFE MLLs within social constructivist learning, intersubjectivity and scaffolding are key concepts in fostering literacy internalization and development through the uptake of mediational means, such as culturally responsive teaching and translanguaging with collaborative dialogue. These mediational means serve as affordances, which are opportunities provided in the language learning environment (Swain et al., 2015). In this paper, we will examine work by Marshall and DeCapua (2013) who integrate all these aspects in the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP) specifically developed to support SLIFE MLLs. MALP builds on Geneva Gay's (2000) framework of Culturally Responsive Teaching, and Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995) work on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, which have been shown to be successful for all students, while taking them a step further to construct a framework specifically to support SLIFE MLLs.

2.2 Interactive model of reading and SLIFE MLL challenges

As noted by Marshall and DeCapua (2013), formal Western education strongly privileges print over the oral transmission of knowledge and accordingly, Canadian secondary schools emphasize reading comprehension as a primary means of knowledge construction. The interactive model of reading posits that "reading comprehension is a combination of identification and interpretation skills" (Alyousef, 2006, p. 63) where readers simultaneously attend to grapho-phonemic, morphological, and lexico-grammatical features while monitoring for meaning through semantic contextual cues and applying global knowledge (Nassaji, 2003).

Although adolescent SLIFE MLLs may have strong oracy skills in their L1, and even in L2 English, they may simultaneously lack familiarity with age-appropriate textual literacy capabilities (Montero et al., 2014), which may include basics such as the concepts of grapho-phonemic correspondence and textual structure. In secondary school, SLIFE MLLs require additional lower-level text supports that their peers generally no longer need, in skills such as grapho-phonetic automaticity and lexico-grammatical knowledge. At the same time, they also may need support with higher-level syntactic and semantic components to make sense of the lower-level information. When these bottom-up and top-down reading processes both require conscious cognitive capacity, higher-level reading comprehension may be compromised as attentional resources focus on decoding and lexico-grammatical recognition (Nassaji, 2003). However, instructional strategies can bolster SLIFE MLLs' reading comprehension by leveraging "a variety of cognitive, linguistic, and non-linguistic skills" in the constructivist classroom context (Nassaji, 2003, p. 261).

3 Pedagogical implications

3.1 Supporting language development for SLIFE MLLs in all classes

3.1.1 Accessing prior knowledge in L1: Translanguaging pedagogy and oral communication

Through an SCT lens, activating students' prior knowledge before introducing the next steps in learning is a well-established teaching practice across educational sectors. However, this mediational means offers a limited amount of useful scaffolding to SLIFE MLLs in a monolingual environment, especially in mainstream content courses. As MLLs' prior knowledge is often accessed through their L1, it is important to encourage students to use their L1 to draw upon their funds of knowledge (Cummins, 2008). When SLIFE MLLs voice their ideas in their L1, it gives peers or the teacher an opportunity to translate those ideas into the L2 and helps SLIFE MLLs develop English vocabulary. Furthermore, as Ontario's learning norms privilege print literacy, SLIFE MLLs with limited L1 literacy face significant barriers as they may struggle to read a text

even if it is L2 text translated into their L1. Therefore, building on students' prior knowledge of the topic, and leveraging students' oracy skills, are key mediational means for student engagement, especially for learning content knowledge. Li et al. (2021) demonstrate that read-alouds of text, as well as levelled questions (moving from simpler to more complex questions) are particularly effective methods to develop students' reading comprehension. These tools are even more useful for SLIFE MLLs as they allow students to start their reading journey and learn content through hearing texts, questions, and responses out loud. This means of social reading participation is vital at this stage when SLIFE MLLs are required to integrate into mainstream classrooms (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007a), even though their literacy skills do not yet afford the learning of content from reading text (Montero et al., 2014). Hearing vocabulary prior to learning written text is a critical stage in L2 development, as vocabulary is stored phonologically more easily than orthographically (Coltheart, 2006), and this is especially true for SLIFE MLLs of limited L1 literacy who are unable to use text translation tools and bilingual notetaking. Furthermore, learning to engage with text orally through levelled questions and improved comprehension skills also develops higher order thinking skills in a social learning environment.

We suggest that all teachers actively take a translanguaging approach and develop a plurilingual pedagogy (Lau & Van Viegen, 2020). This pedagogical approach encourages students to talk amongst themselves in whichever language(s) they prefer as languaging develops comprehension of the read-aloud texts and personal self-expression. A translanguaging approach aligns with students' regular practice of using their entire language repertoire to make meaning of the world and communicate in new social environments. When teachers promote a translanguaging pedagogy "for teaching and learning curriculum content, they create social space for the multilingual language user, what Li (2018) has called *translanguaging spaces*" (Van Viegen, 2020, p. 65). In this space, SLIFE MLLs can utilize their agency to use all their language resources, which affords further comprehension and understanding of the course content.

In addition, teachers can also take on some burden of comprehending students' translingual voicing (whether it is through asking other multilingual students for translations or using voice recognition translation software), as this eases the cognitive load on MLLs. Taking this step also creates a positive affective space for the SLIFE MLLs in the classroom to voice their ideas about texts studied in the read-alouds. Furthermore, this valorizes students' knowledge in their L1 oracy, positioning SLIFE to have more confidence in themselves, rather than being in an environment that might inadvertently mark students as deficient in language and knowledge (Binogi Pedagogiskt Forum, 2018).

3.1.2 Language acquisition needs: BICS, CALP, and CULP

To successfully graduate high school, SLIFE MLLs need to develop lexical and discourse competence with various kinds of language, categorized by Cummins (1979) as Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) or everyday language, and Cognitive Academic Linguistic Proficiency (CALP), which describes the academic English needed to effectively comprehend and discuss academic concepts in content classes. Cummins (1981) also theorized that developing skills in any language develops students' Cognitive Underlying Language Proficiency (CULP), which supports the language development in all their languages as various knowledge transfers from their L1 into their L2 based on sociolinguistic conditions, including the transfer of scientific conceptual elements, metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies, pragmatic aspects of language use, specific linguistic elements, and phonological awareness. However, SLIFE MLLs' limited development of CALP and CULP in their first language affords less L1

CULP transfer into L2. Therefore, supporting SLIFE MLLs requires not only translanguaging in the classroom, but trans-semiotising as well (Lin et al., 2020). To invite trans-semiotising into the classroom, we must consider the value of multimodal texts and expressions to develop reading comprehension and multiliteracies, further described below.

3.1.3 Trans-semiotising practices & the multimodalities-entextualisation cycle

Lin et al. (2020) propose the “multimodalities-entextualisation cycle (MEC)” as a model of learning that can benefit SLIFE MLLs by building on translanguaging pedagogies to develop students’ BICS and CALP concurrently (p. 89). In this cycle, teachers start by creating an experiential context through multimodal resources, then engage students in reading and note-making in both everyday and academic language in their L1 and L2 before finally guiding them in entextualising these experiences in the target language. Lin et al. (2020) suggest that teachers “create a rich experiential context, which would use multimodal texts, including images, videos, graphic organizers and action and activities” (p. 89). Furthermore, teachers should “engage students in reading & [sic] note-making,” which is described “using a combination of everyday and academic language in students’ L1 and L2” (Lin et al., 2020, p. 88), essentially assuring a trans-semiotic reading experience. Students can develop reading notes as bilingual notes, graphic organizers, or even mind maps, visuals, or comics. Thus, students’ “reading notes” can also be visual representations of their understanding. We suggest that where students have even rudimentary literacy in their L1, teachers can use students’ L1 and L2 when developing questions, organizers, and other texts that students use to develop their L1 and L2 literacy skills concurrently as both will contribute to their CULP (Cummins, 2008). Fitzsimmons and Tharmaseelan (2025) also suggest practical trans-semiotising methods, conveying meanings through multiple mediums (text, images), which we recommend Ontario teachers use in their practice for scaffolding SLIFE MLLs’ emerging literacy. These include text engineering (i.e., breaking up and emphasizing text in various ways to draw focus to words and develop comprehension), sketchnoting (i.e., creating sketches while notetaking to show comprehension), and the Picture Word Induction model (i.e., taking a picture and labelling aspects of the picture to develop vocabulary) (Calhoun, 1999). Furthermore, all these multimodal methods of learning can be combined with translanguaging to enhance student comprehension.

3.2 Supporting literacy for SLIFE MLLs in ELD and ESL classrooms

3.2.1 Guided reading, running records, and support for early reading instructional methods

Students should be exposed to symbols, the alphabet, and phonics as soon as possible to develop and automatize their lower-level reading processes. SLIFE MLLs need their ELD and ESL teachers to shift their focus from literature study to literacy study and attend to teaching “the reader, not the text” (Montero et al., 2014, p. 61). Once students are able to blend sounds and connect to orthography, guided reading using levelled readers (books that increase in difficulty level in terms of phonics, word count or syntax) is a powerful tool for developing literacy skills. Guided reading consists of students vocalizing text passages softly to themselves with the teacher nearby to provide guidance as required (Montero et al., 2014). Guided reading allows teachers to model reading and comprehension practices in a zone of proximal development, as well as apply dynamic assessment (Swain et al., 2015) in observing students processing texts as they read, helping students develop reading skills and strategies (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Furthermore, guided reading, combined with running records, which are continuous notes by the teacher on a student’s reading performance, and paying attention to noting gaps that may need attention and

review can demonstrate where students may be struggling in their reading practices so that teachers can plan appropriate further instruction.

Montero et al. (2014) trained and studied a Canadian teacher's use of levelled readers in guided reading practices, integrating early reading instructional methods. Using running records, the authors determined that this teacher's SLIFE MLLs made gains of 3-13 reading levels in this program, compared to SLIFE MLLs in a semester that the teacher taught 3 years prior without these methods, where gains were only 1-3 reading levels (See more detailed comparisons in Figure A1). The power of using guided reading practices, running records, and early reading instructional methods, therefore, cannot be overstated.

3.2.2 *The mutually adaptive learning paradigm (MALP)*

DeCapua and Marshall's (2023) mutually adaptive learning paradigm (MALP) is a framework that encompasses all previously recommended components: combining SLIFE MLLs' oracy skills, developing their literacy skills, and preparing students to engage with schooling through print medium instruction. MALP outlines two ways of learning. The first way is learning on topics of immediate relevance that are interconnected to people's lives; it views learning as a shared responsibility through oral transmission, where a speaker and listener work together to develop knowledge, and it focuses on pragmatic tasks based on lived experiences. The second way of learning is through formal education that often teaches topics of future relevance to students and requires a level of independence and individual accountability while students learn from the written word; learning in this way is often based on decontextualized texts and focuses on academic ways of thinking (DeCapua & Marshall, 2023).

MALP suggests that we combine both paradigms of education by first accepting learner conditions and ensuring topics of learning are of immediate relevance and connected to their lives, then by combining learner and formal education processes by having students learn through oral transmission in groups as well as individually through the spoken word. In addition, MALP advocates for a shift from pragmatic task learning to targeting academic learning and formal education activities with familiar language and content (DeCapua & Marshall, 2023). This paradigm affords teachers with the mediational means to conceptualize SLIFE MLLs' needs as these students enter our school systems, as well as help them adapt to our education system and transfer into literacy-based knowledge development. First, building on Gay's (2000) culturally responsive teaching and Ladson-Billing's (1995) culturally responsive pedagogy principles of using texts and curriculum that are relevant to students' lives while holding them to high academic standards, SLIFE MLLs' learner conditions are recognized by MALP, foregrounding learners' need to read text content with immediate relevance to them. In addition, teachers operating within this paradigm must develop and maintain a positive classroom community conducive to students' social reading practice, a cognitively demanding task that requires a learning environment of much care and support. MALP then emphasizes the need for teachers to scaffold students by combining the learning processes of shared responsibility and oral transmission of knowledge, a process which may be more familiar to SLIFE MLLs, with the newer process of learning from the written word and having individual accountability for that learning. Ultimately, this paradigm affords teachers and SLIFE MLLs the structure for targeted learning of decontextualized tasks and academic ways of thinking, especially when learners are simultaneously developing literacy skills.

3.2.3 *Assessment practices*

The current assessment practices for SLIFE MLLs in Ontario show some gaps and limitations in terms of the focus and testing methods. Traditional assessment models in Ontario,

especially in subject area courses outside of the ELD/ESL class, often reflect a monolingual-dominant and deficiency-focused approach without considering the complex linguistic repertoires or educational histories of SLIFE MLLs. Official guidance for Ontario secondary schools outline “Program considerations for English language learners” and includes suggestions for adapting the program to the MLLs in the classroom along with instructional strategies and assessment practices (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 39). Instructional strategies include “extensive use of visual cues, graphic organizers, and scaffolding; previewing of textbooks; pre-teaching of key vocabulary; peer tutoring; strategic use of students’ first language” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 39). Assessment accommodations include “granting of extra time, use of oral interviews, demonstrations or visual presentations, or tasks requiring completion of graphic organizers or cloze sentences instead of essay questions and other assessment tasks that depend heavily on proficiency in English” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 40). In other words, policy seeks only to ensure that texts are simplified and accessible to MLLs. Although some strategic use of students’ first language is encouraged, especially as it relates to translation of vocabulary, the curriculum does not encourage students to develop their understanding of content through other languages outside of English. Nor do assessment accommodations suggest students demonstrate their knowledge through languages other than English. Indeed, all the suggestions move toward simplification of assessment requirements.

This, however, is a monolingual English-dominant and deficiency-focused approach that does not consider the complex linguistic repertoires or educational histories of SLIFE MLLs. This approach dramatically fails to capture students’ actual capabilities, especially when assessing literacy in English, as it assumes uninterrupted prior schooling (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015; Van Viegen, 2020). As a consequence, ESL/ELD programs in Ontario tend to be largely focused on “standard” English proficiency benchmarks for placement and progress tracking purposes. For instance, in the initial assessment procedure, school board staff evaluate English language proficiency through a structured interview for oral communication skills (listening and speaking), as well as assessments of reading comprehension and writing (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007a). However, these types of Western formal assessments might be unfamiliar testing formats to students and not allow them to showcase their holistic abilities, such as practical knowledge, problem-solving skills, social strengths, or their actual learning and progress (Pentón Herrera, 2022). Although early reading instruction experts within the Ontario Ministry of Education (2003) appreciate the development of literacy skills in L1, and later suggest “where possible, at least part of the initial assessment should be conducted in the student’s first or dominant language [...]” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007a), these initial assessments might fail to address the gap in uninterrupted learning experiences even in L1 to offer a more nuanced picture of SLIFE MLLs’ literacy potential.

We instead advocate for a broadening of the texts used in class, as well as a broadening of the linguistic repertoire that students are allowed to use during assessment. They would be able to learn and demonstrate their knowledge more completely by using their full linguistic repertoire in assessment, which is not suggested in current curriculum documents. These gaps and limitations in assessing SLIFE MLLs can be addressed effectively by adopting an inclusive, culturally responsive, and adaptable approach to meet the needs of these students. Teachers should consider avoiding excessive use of high-stress product-based assessments, like tests and quizzes, with SLIFE MLLs and diversify assessment practices. DeCapua and Marshall (2011) advocate for oral and written modalities to prioritize process over product, along with the idea of a gradual transition to academic-focused assessments using MALP. In Ontario, especially in the cases of limited or no

literacy in L1, this could include students using actions, verbal explanations, and visual representations to show comprehension as early reading strategies (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2003). Therefore, a combination of standardized testing, running records, and qualitative methods (e.g., observations, interviews, and content analysis of instructional materials) (Montero et al., 2014), as well as classroom-based tools (e.g., systematic skills assessments, unit examinations and quizzes, portfolios, performance tasks, and report cards), could help educators explore learners' cognitive processes and generate their comprehensive literacy profiles efficiently (Short & Boyson, 2012). Other suggested assessment practices by Cohan and Honigsfeld (2017) include continuous formative assessment in both English and content areas, differentiated assessment materials, and a collaborative evaluation process with social workers, guidance counsellors, and teaching assistants who support the academic and social development of SLIFE students. Above all, translanguaging serves as one of the most effective pedagogical tools since it allows students to demonstrate their literacy skills across languages through access to their linguistic repertoire, bilingual assessment tools, bilingual dictionaries, or technology (e.g., Google Translate, image searches, assistive technology, etc.) (Van Viegen, 2020). In sum, assessment practices should be reconceptualized by means of the collective support of the aforementioned practices to achieve a flexible, holistic and culturally relevant assessment approach for SLIFE MLLs.

4 Suggestions for next steps and future research

As supported by SCT, MALP, and translanguaging pedagogies, a dynamic, multilingual approach to literacy development for SLIFE MLLs requires redirection of both classroom practices and broader educational structures. Future research can examine how to better adapt pedagogical approaches and system-level adjustments to maintain equitable and inclusive literacy development.

For further research, more empirical studies are necessary to track the reading trajectories of SLIFE MLLs across time and educational contexts. The significance of targeted interventions is evident in Montero et al. (2014) and Nassaji (2003), who investigated foundational reading skills. Additionally, more studies on action research implementing multimodal applications, such as a study with digital multimodal composing in storytelling activity using voiceovers, visual elements, textual components, and creative layouts by Tour et al. (2024) or plurilingual pedagogies, and as seen in a study with the use of heritage languages in book creation, classroom presentation or plurilingual poetry writing by Liggins (2023), proved to help plurilingual students develop their full linguistic potential, increase confidence, and develop literacy skills.

When it comes to the educators of SLIFE MLLs, they need professional and systemic support in their instructional approach. Since they carry the heavy responsibility of juggling course learning outcomes and the unique needs of SLIFE MLLs, action research projects and teacher training initiatives could provide them with the knowledge and skills to apply targeted pedagogies, such as translanguaging, through “informed professional practice” (Costley & Leung, 2020, p. 11). More specifically, teachers might also need training in developing and implementing creative ways to incorporate non-traditional assessments that consider SLIFE students' backgrounds and learning progress to implement effective assessment practices (Cohan & Honigsfeld, 2017). Most importantly, while implementing an inclusive program for SLIFE MLLs, comprehensive professional development opportunities are prerequisites for helping teachers develop culturally responsive practices and socio-emotional support; furthermore, we should assess the impact of continuing professional development on teachers' ability to address the needs of SLIFE MLLs (Kray & Burns, 2024). Therefore, the successful implementation of constructivist, asset-based, plurilingual, and culturally responsive pedagogies depends on sustainable teacher professional

development. Although there are policies in place to include professional development days in the year, there should be more research to assess whether sufficient professional development for literacy development of SLIFE is in place, and further, if that learning is then implemented in the classrooms.

Ultimately, there is a dire need for more research on current policy and planning in the province. Further research needs to address how these education policies block or carve the path to fill the gaps in the literacy development of SLIFE MLLs going into mainstream courses. At the policy implementation level, there should be a separate categorization of SLIFE MLLs in data reporting and tracking to provide more tailored interventions to improve literacy skills by lifting the linguistic and social barriers, as seen in California, Massachusetts, and New York (California Department of Education, 2020; Kray & Burns, 2024; New York State Education Department, 2019). The Ontario Ministry of Education (2008) also acknowledges these policy gaps, namely inconsistent assessment practices, inadequate teacher training, insufficient curriculum adjustment, and lack of financial and human resources. Therefore, researchers and practitioners should keep advocating for curricular transformations, such as revising assessment policies, updating curriculum to reflect corresponding pedagogies, and revisiting funding for targeted mediation to serve English language learners with limited prior schooling.

5 Conclusion

SLIFE MLLs require more than language instruction. They can be fully supported only through a holistic, culturally responsive and equity-focused approach. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2014) urges schools to integrate differentiated instruction, inclusive classroom practices and collaboration among educators, families, and communities. To bridge the foundational gaps and thrive in a new educational environment, learners need academic and socio-emotional support from educators. Throughout this paper, we have addressed potential frameworks to support SLIFE MLLs achieve better reading outcomes and experience better learning experiences within and beyond the classroom.

An integrative approach that combines SCT, Translanguaging Pedagogy, and MALP into teaching and learning could benefit adolescent SLIFE MLLs in Ontario secondary schools through better literacy and reading outcomes. SCT supports the idea that social interactions and cultural backgrounds shape learning; therefore, reading instruction and assessments should value students' cultural and linguistic strengths. MALP focuses on the gradual adjustment to match students' experiences and knowledge; therefore, reading instruction and assessments should follow a process-oriented approach that meets students where they are. Translanguaging Pedagogy recognizes the multiple languages students use to understand and show their learning; therefore, reading instruction and assessments should encourage them to use all their language skills to help them show their true abilities. All in all, each framework provides distinctive but interconnected strategies that have the potential to address the complex linguistic, cognitive and social-emotional needs of SLIFE MLLs.

References

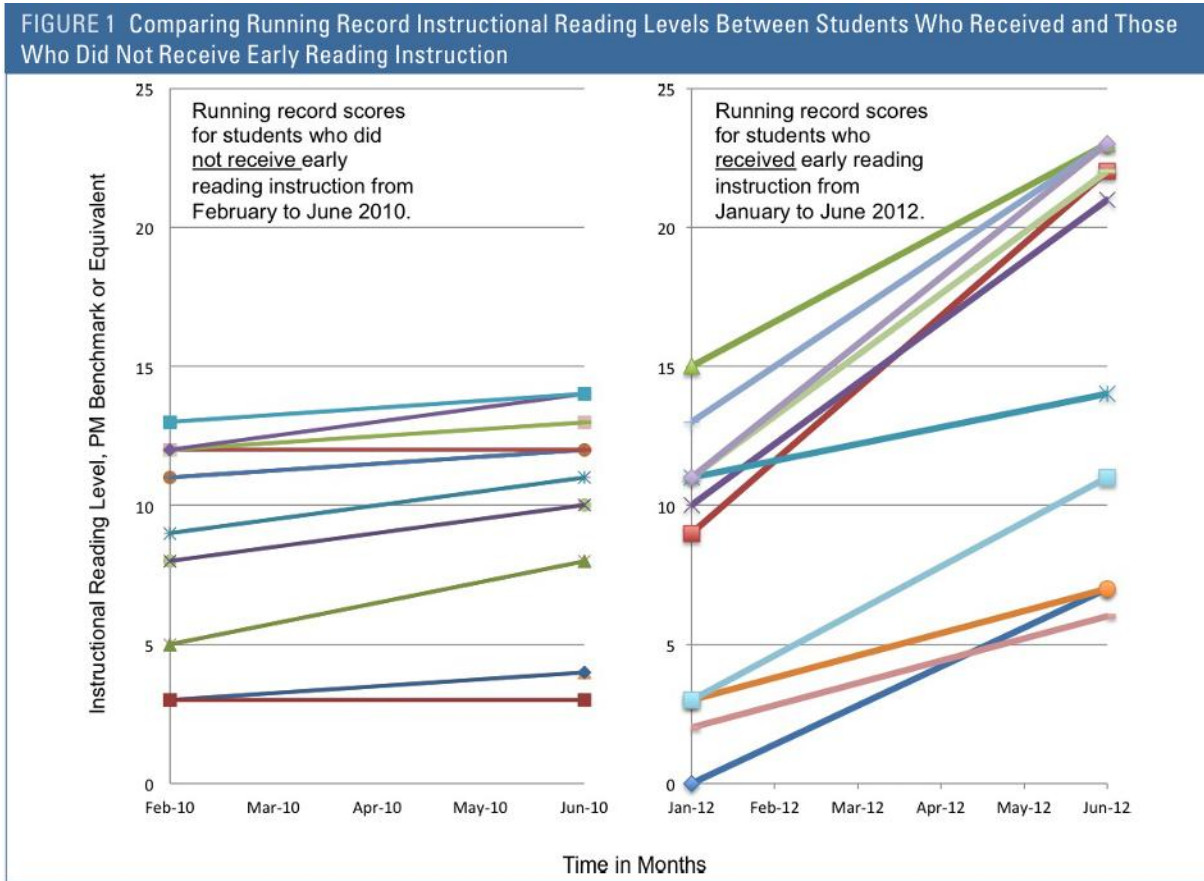
- Alyousef, H. S. (2006). Teaching reading comprehension to ESL/EFL learners. *Journal of Language and Learning*, 5(1), 63–73.
- Binogi Pedagogiskt Forum. (2018, November 7). *Jim Cummins on language and identity* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xuvFaNgAv88&t=128s>
- Calhoun, E. (1999). *Teaching beginning reading and writing with the Picture Word Inductive Model*. Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.

- California Department of Education. (2020). *Improving education for multilingual and English learner students: Research to practice*. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ml/documents/mleeducation.pdf>
- Cohan, A., & Honigsfeld, A. (2017). Students with interrupted formal education (SIFEs): Actionable practices. *NABE Journal of Research and Practice*, 8(1), 166–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26390043.2017.12067802>
- Coltheart, M. (2006). Dual route and connectionist models of reading: An overview. *London Review of Education*, 4(1), 5–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110600574322>
- Costley, T., & Leung, C. (2020). Putting translanguaging into practice: A view from England. *System (Linköping)*, 92, 102270–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2020.102270>
- Cummins, J. (1979) Cognitive/academic language proficiency, linguistic interdependence, the optimum age question and some other matters. *Working Papers on Bilingualism*, 19, 121–129.
- Cummins, J. (1981). The role of primary language development in promoting educational success for language minority students. In California State Department of Education (Ed.). *Schooling and language minority students: A theoretical framework* (pp. 3–49). Los Angeles: National Dissemination and Assessment Center.
- Cummins, J. (2008). Teaching for transfer: Challenging the two solitudes assumption in bilingual education. In J. Cummins & H. Hornberger (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education* (2nd ed., pp. 65–75). Springer.
- Cummins, J., Early, M., & Stille, S. (2011). Frames of reference: Identity texts in perspective. In J. Cummins & M. Early (Eds.), *Identity texts: The collaborative creation of power in multilingual schools* (pp. 21–44). Trentham Books.
- DeCapua, A., & Marshall, H. W. (2011). Reaching ELLs at risk: Instruction for students with limited or interrupted formal education. *Preventing School Failure*, 55(1), 35–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10459880903291680>
- DeCapua, A., & Marshall, H. W. (2015). Promoting achievement for ELLs with limited or interrupted formal education: A culturally responsive approach. *Principal Leadership* 15(6), 48–51. National Association of Secondary School Principals.
- DeCapua, A., & Marshall, H. W. (2023). *Breaking new ground for SLIFE: The mutually adaptive learning paradigm*. University of Michigan Press.
- DeCapua, A., & Wintergerst, A. C. (2016). *Crossing cultures in the language classroom*. University of Michigan Press.
- Fitzsimmons, A., & Tharmaseelan, K. (2025, February 21). *Supporting MLLs with limited prior schooling* [Conference presentation]. Reading for the Love of It Conference 2025, Toronto, ON, Canada.
- Fountas, I. C., & Pinnell, G. S. (2012). Guided reading: The romance and the reality. *The Reading Teacher*, 66(4), 268–284. <https://doi.org/10.1002/TRTR.01123>
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.
- Kray, F. M. & Burns, M. B. (2024, December). *Learning with the field: Understanding “Promising Practices” for students with limited or interrupted formal education in Massachusetts schools*. American Institutes for Research. <https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/sliffe/learning-with-the-field.pdf>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32, 465–491. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003465>

- Lau, S. M. C. & Van Viegen, S. (Eds.). (2020). *Plurilingual pedagogies: Critical and creative endeavors for equitable language in education*. Springer.
- Li, J.-T., Tong, F., Irby, B. J., Lara-Alecio, R., & Rivera, H. (2021). The effects of four instructional strategies on English learners' English reading comprehension: A meta-analysis. *Language Teaching Research*, 28(1), 231–252. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168821994133>
- Liggins, S. (2023). Heritage language speakers' responses to plurilingual pedagogies in a secondary school context. In S. Ainsworth, D. Griffiths, & G. Macrory (Eds.), *Multimodality and multilingualism* (pp. 15–33). Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781800413399-006>
- Lin, A., Wu, Y., & Lemke, J. (2020). “It takes a village to research a village”: Conversations between Angel Lin and Jay Lemke on contemporary issues in translanguaging. In S. Van Viegen & S. M. C. Lau (Eds.), *Plurilingual pedagogies: Critical and creative endeavors for equitable language in education* (pp. 47–74). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36983-5_3
- Marshall, H. W. & DeCapua, A. (2013). *Making the transition to classroom success: Culturally responsive teaching for struggling language learners*. University of Michigan Press.
- Montero, M. K., Newmaster, S., & Ledger, S. (2014). Exploring early reading instructional strategies to advance the print literacy development of adolescent SLIFE. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 58(1), 59–69. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.318>
- Nassaji, H. (2003). Higher-level and lower-level text processing skills in advanced ESL reading comprehension. *The Modern Language Journal*, 87(2), 261–276. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-4781.00189>
- New York State Education Department. (2019, November). *SIFE manual: Bridges to academic success*. https://www.nysed.gov/sites/default/files/programs/bilingual-ed/sife-manual_12-12-2019_final-for-website-a.pdf
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2003). *Early reading strategy: The report of the expert panel on early reading in Ontario*. https://professionallyspeaking.oct.ca/march_2011/features/camp_or_school_extras/reading.pdf
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2007a). *English language learners ESL and ELD programs and services: Policies and procedures for Ontario elementary and secondary schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12*. Queen's Printer for Ontario. <https://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/esleldprograms/esleldprograms.pdf>
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2007b). *The Ontario Curriculum Grades 9 to 12: English as a second language and English literacy development*. Government of Ontario. <https://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/esl912currb.pdf>
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2008). *Supporting English language learners with limited prior schooling: A practical guide for Ontario educators (Grades 3 to 12)*. Queen's Printer for Ontario. https://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/manyroots/ELL_LPS.pdf
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). *The Ontario curriculum: Social sciences and humanities, grades 9 to 12 (revised)*. Queen's Printer for Ontario. <https://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/ssciences9to122013.pdf>
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2014). *English literacy development: Supporting English language learners with limited prior schooling*. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat

- (Capacity Building Series, Special Edition #36).
<https://www.onted.ca/monographs/capacity-building-series/english-literacy-development>
- Pentón Herrera, L. J. (2022). Students with limited or interrupted formal education in primary and secondary classrooms in the U.S., Australia, Canada, and the UK. In L. J. Pentón Herrera (Ed.), *English and students with limited or interrupted formal education* (Vol. 54, pp. 25–42). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-86963-2_3
- Short, D. J., & Boyson, B. A. (2012). *Helping newcomer students succeed in secondary schools and beyond*. Center for Applied Linguistics. <https://www.cal.org/publications/helping-newcomer-students/>
- Swain, M., Kinnear, P., & Steinman, L. (2015). *Sociocultural theory in second language education* (2nd ed.). Multilingual Matters.
- Tour, E., Turner, M., Keary, A., & Tran-Dang, K.-L. (2024). Bringing plurilingual strategies into linguistically diverse classrooms: Affordances of digital multimodal composing. *Language and Education*, 38(3), 465–481. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2023.2203124>
- Van Viegen, S. (2020). Translanguaging for and as learning with youth from refugee backgrounds. *Australian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 3(1), 60–76. <https://doi.org/10.29140/ajal.v3n1.300>

Appendix A: Chart comparing the effects of early reading instruction on students' reading levels



Note. This figure compares the running record scores of students who received and did not receive early reading instruction and has been reproduced from Montero et al. (2014) under the sharing and reproduction licensing agreement between York University and Wiley.