ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION OR A READING PROBLEM?

In 2019–20 school year, approximately one in ten K–12 students were identified as English learners (ELs). There were 208 different languages spoken by EL students and/or family members and/or caregivers at home. Beginning in summer 2021, the WIDA Screener for Kindergarten and WIDA Screener for Grades 1–12 will be used as the identification screener and the WIDA ACCESS will be used as the annual proficiency assessment for ELs in the state of Washington (See Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.).

Educators often wonder if reading struggles are English language acquisition or a reading problem? EL students, without learning disabilities, may exhibit reading behaviors and characteristics that look like non-EL students who have reading disabilities (Gaab, 2017). In fact, some EL students struggle with both language and reading and may have dyslexia. Students of any language can have dyslexia regardless of their linguistic backgrounds (Sandman-Hurley, 2020). It is imperative to accurately identify all students with reading disabilities as early as possible. Yet, caution must be used not to confuse a language development with a reading disability (Collier, 2011). If EL students have weakness associated with dyslexia in their home language, they may have difficulties processing English sounds or phonological components of English language. Thus, collaboration with family members and caregivers and knowledge about a student’s home literacy experience is critical.

FOR ALL STUDENTS

- Partner with family members and caregivers to learn about their children’s former school experience, including reading issues in any language.
- Schools should partner with family members and caregivers to learn about their children’s literacy experience in any language, including English.

K-2ND GRADERS

Fraser, Adelson, and Geva (2014) point out that EL students develop word-level reading skills (e.g., letter name and sound, decoding/encoding skills) in a similar way to non-EL students.
• All K-2nd EL students should be screened for early literacy skill development in their home language and/or English according to the recommended OSPI assessment timeline. Please refer to the [OSPI Early Literacy Screening Guidance for Multilingual/English Learners](#) for the minimum WIDA proficiency levels.

• Educators who are fluent in EL students’ home language may use the valid, equivalent home language screener if available.

• If the assessment is given in English, reading struggles should be expected. **EL students should not be compared to their native English peers’ performance.**

• Educators should monitor the progress of their word-level reading skills.

• If a gap in their word-level reading skills gets wider, a team of educators who work with the EL student, including the classroom teacher, reading specialist, and the EL teacher should discuss the gap and appropriate interventions.

**3RD-12TH GRADERS**

Unless EL students’ formal education was abruptly interrupted (e.g., living in a refugee camp), EL students should be able to demonstrate their grade-level reading skills in their home language.

• Older EL students who struggle with reading in their home language may also struggle with English language development.

• Educators can adapt the instructional/assessment guidelines stated in Grade 3 and Above_____ (the title of the handout) for EL students with reading problems, including dyslexia.

• EL educators can provide the information about typical/atypical language development. Typical language development may include word-level reading skills with a delay in overall reading comprehension. EL students are developing decoding/encoding skills while also making connections between vocabulary and contextual meaning. This double-work is typical of EL students learning to read and develop literacy skills in English.

**RESOURCES**


