

Three Key Tier 1/Core Concepts Regarding Multilingual Learners Essential for Designing and Implementing Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

by Susan M. Connolly

One of the more promising educational reform efforts arising across this country is a structured, systemic approach to providing universal and equitable access to strong core instruction for all students while also providing additional layers of supports to students who struggle to meet challenging state standards. This process, often referred to as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), provides an overarching structure, as well as systems, to provide all learners with supports for behavior, academic achievement, social-emotional growth, attendance, health and wellness, and other aspects of a whole-child approach to educational services (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016; Mercado, 2018). At the same time, the challenge to appropriately provide language development instruction for the ever-growing population of multilingual learners within our school systems continues to be an issue for many districts, in spite of Supreme Court decisions, civil rights laws, and decades of research which clearly outline what is needed to provide equitable opportunities for multilingual learners to succeed in meeting challenging state standards (Thomas & Collier, 2012). Can districts design and implement MTSS which provides effective language development programs that meet the legal requirements as well as prove efficacious in developing students' academic English and content learning? In order for MTSS to succeed with multilingual learners, it is essential that districts consider foundational concepts that are unique to multilingual learners as well as key elements which must be addressed in Tier 1/core structures and instructional practices (Multi-tiered System of Supports for English Learners, 2018). Districts will benefit from keeping these foundational concepts and key elements as well as legal requirements in mind as they create and implement MTSS.

The following is a condensed description of foundational concepts and the key elements that undergird MTSS in districts which include multilingual learners. (For a discussion of the legal requirements and guidelines for programs for multilingual learners, see [Laws, Regulations, and Guidance](#)).

Foundational Concepts for Educating Multilingual Learners

Multilingual learners bring many cultural and linguistic assets to the classroom upon which teachers can draw in order to develop students' academic English and content understanding. Teachers who embrace an asset-based mindset look at what multilingual learners can do with language and content rather than focusing on lagging skills (Thomas & Collier, 2012). These teachers structure instruction to support students' access and use of all their existing linguistic knowledge and skills across languages while activating and building upon students' background knowledge of the content topics. This provides the foundational structure for all lessons where multilingual learners are present. For example, teachers draw explicit attention to cognates and false cognates between languages and also plan for and structure regular opportunities for authentic peer interactions and discussion of complex content and texts while providing linguistic scaffolds and supports.

Key Elements and Definitions

The following elements are essential components of MTSS for districts with multilingual learners:

- Language development, which consists of two parts—designated ELD, also referred to as focused-language study (FLS), and integrated ELD, also referred to as discipline-specific academic language expansion (DALE) (CGCS, 2017)
- Access to content, which encompasses the essential instructional practices that enable multilingual learners to learn content while still acquiring academic English (These instructional practices are incorporated into various program models such as sheltered instruction, SDAIE, GLAD, SIOP, and content-based ESL.)

These elements—designated ELD, integrated ELD, and access to content—are needed and based upon legal requirements.

Designated ELD/Focused-Language Study

Designated ELD or FLS is a dedicated, protected time of the day when students are strategically grouped by proficiency level and taught the academic language relative to their unique needs and specific to on-grade level academic English necessary for grade-level academic content learning. Instruction focuses specifically on English and how it works across all domains: speaking, listening, reading, writing (Thurmond, 2019; CGCS, 2017). Instruction is provided by a teacher with specific knowledge and skills relative to language acquisition.

Integrated ELD/Discipline-Specific Academic Language Expansion

Integrated ELD or DALE is “Academic language instruction throughout the day and integrated across various content areas. Teachers provide an intentional focus on the content-specific language demands and academic language that ELLs, along with their native English-speaking peers, must develop” (CGCS, 2017). ESSA Title III requires schools to “...implement high-quality language instruction education programs, ...based on scientifically-based research, that will enable EL students to speak, listen, read, and write English and meet challenging State standards” (US DOJ/DOE, 2015). A high-quality language instruction program requires both designated and integrated ELD.

Access to Content

In order to meet challenging state standards, multilingual learners need instruction that makes the content accessible and meaningful. Access to content refers to “meaningful access to the core curriculum (e.g., reading/ language arts, math, science, and social studies) and is a key component in ensuring that ELs acquire the tools to succeed in general education classrooms within a reasonable length of time. Thus, both SEAs and LEAs have the dual obligations to not only provide programs that enable EL students to attain English proficiency, but also to provide support in other curricular areas that will ensure ELs have equal opportunities to participate in the curriculum” (US DOE/OELA, 2015).

The dual obligation of designated and integrated ELD coupled with supported access to content comprise the key elements of Tier 1/core instruction essential for creating an effective multi-tiered system of supports where multilingual learners are present. Table 1 contains examples and non-examples for each of the three key elements.

It is essential for districts to maintain focus on the key elements as they proceed with designing and implementing MTSS. Language development—both designated and integrated—as well as access to content are necessary Tier 1/core services for multilingual learners. Additional language development services may also be required in the

Key Concept	What it looks like	What it doesn't look like
Language: Designated English Language Development (ELD) or Focused Language Study (FLS)	<p>Students grouped by like-proficiency level.</p> <p>Lessons planned and delivered by certificated educator who is endorsed in bilingual/ESL (may be supported by para-professional)</p> <p>Language proficiency standards and students' unique language needs relative to grade-level core content learning provide the curriculum/foundation for planning the lessons</p>	<p>All same-grade multilingual learners grouped at the same time for ELD and taught the same lesson using the same materials</p> <p>Reading/writing intervention</p> <p>No connection to core lessons</p>
Language: Integrated English Language Development (ELD) or Discipline-Specific Academic Language Expansion (DALE)	<p>Core content teachers identify language demand of content lessons</p> <p>Core content teachers plan and deliver lessons which include specific attention to the academic language across all domains (speaking, listening, reading, writing) needed to understand the content and meaningfully participate in the lesson activities</p> <p>Addressing language demand includes unpacking “juicy sentences”, using wide-angle and close reads of complex, grade level text, making explicit connections to cognates and false cognates</p> <p>Often accomplished by co-planning with a language specialist, co-planning in content or grade level PLC groups supported by language specialist, and/or the language portion of the lesson is taught by the language specialist in a co-teaching environment</p>	<p>No attention to language demand</p> <p>Core teachers share vocabulary lists without addressing the language demand</p> <p>Texts assigned for reading without teaching the text/ unpacking the language</p> <p>No interaction/collaboration between content teachers and language specialists</p>
Access to Content	<p>Use of graphic organizers, gestures, pictures, realia, academic discourse, response frames, word walls, concept maps, to name a few, to make content accessible and comprehensible as well as to render participation meaningful</p> <p>Teachers provide structured, frequent, supported opportunities for student-to student discourse, and actively listen for and note students' use of targeted academic language (language targets for the lesson focused on vocabulary, syntax, register and grammar).</p>	<p>Teachers use verbal explanations or provide written instructions without scaffolds and tools</p> <p>No/limited opportunities for student-to student discussion/dialogue;</p> <p>No formative monitoring of academic language use</p>

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supplemental Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports for students not thriving with the above outlined Tier 1/core instruction (Multi-tiered System of Supports for English Learners, 2018).

Designing and implementing MTSS is not only positive in its promise for improving the education of all students,

it is also dangerous if the unique needs of multilingual learners are not considered from the initial design stages through full implementation. Districts that keep the foundational concepts and key elements identified in this article at the forefront of all work related to MTSS are more likely to meet the civil rights requirements for multilingual learners and also more likely to achieve the outcomes they have targeted by implementing MTSS.

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Sue Connolly began her professional career with a B.A. in English (Social Science and French Minor) from Seattle University, followed by a Post-Bac Teaching Major in Mathematics at the University of Washington and a teaching certificate from Seattle University. Her early teaching years were mostly middle-level math and English. She obtained her M.Ed. from Central Washington University, focusing on teaching students acquiring English as an additional language. Sue enjoys delving into the research and helping teachers understand not only what we know works for multilingual learners but also supporting and empowering teachers to make connections between the research, best practices and their own unique context. Currently, Sue is a Bilingual Program Supervisor at OSPI and has previously supported districts as an OSSI Continuous Improvement Partner focused on multilingual learners and as a private consultant. Sue also spent 10 years as a faculty member at Central Washington University in the Teacher Preparation Program. You can contact her at sue.connolly6@gmail.com.