

# Assessment Selection for Multilingual Learners' Reading Development

*Jeannette Mancilla-Martinez, Jin Kyoung Hwang, Min Hyun Oh*

Assessment and instruction should be linked, but this is easier said than done, especially for the large and growing population of multilingual school-age students across the nation.

## Introduction

A wealth of research has focused on understanding and supporting multilingual students' reading development. Yet, how best to select assessments and interpret assessment data to inform reading instruction for multilingual learners is difficult for many educators. This study aims to serve as a springboard for critical reflection from all educators responsible for supporting elementary-age multilingual learners' reading development. We first acknowledge the complexity of multilingual reading development and then present an accessible roadmap for understanding multilingual learners to help educators with (1) selecting equitable language and reading assessments, (2) interpreting assessment data with equity in mind, even if English-only assessments must be used, and (3) planning equitable reading instruction.

## Are Multilingual Learners the Same as English Learners?

Most people across the globe speak more than one language, meaning they are multilingual, and the United States is no exception (Romanowski, 2020). In fact, the majority of the U.S. school-age population from multilingual homes are U.S.-born and most are also U.S. citizens who have attended U.S. schools since formal school entry (Sugarman, 2019). Furthermore, traditional immigrant destination states (e.g., California) continue to be home to the greatest number of multilingual learners, but the largest growth is concentrated in the American South (also referred to as "new immigrant destination states") (Krogstad, 2020). Unlike students from English-only homes, multilingual learners are formally designated by schools as coming from a non-English language background. The non-English language background term highlights the deficit terminology that has too often characterized this heterogeneous population of learners, centered on English proficiency. The key—and too often overlooked—point is that non-English language

background learners can be (a) in the process of developing English proficiency (i.e., formally designed by their schools as English learners (ELs) due to limited English proficiency) or (b) English proficient (EP) either since school entry or after receiving EL-support (i.e., they are *not* ELs). Put simply, ELs are a subgroup within the broader and much larger population of multilingual learners. In this study, we focus on elementary-age multilingual learners, who come from homes where a language other than English is used to some extent (i.e., students who are not from English-only homes). We only distinguish between the subgroups of ELs and EP students when relevant for assessment and instructional implications.

## Multilingualism is Not a Risk Factor

Among the hundreds of home languages spoken by U.S. multilingual learners, Spanish remains the most common (Office of English Language Acquisition, 2019). The focus of this study is thus on multilingual elementary-age students from Spanish-speaking homes, but the implications of this study are applicable to all multilingual learners. Within Spanish-speaking households, some students may be more proficient in Spanish than in English, some may be more proficient in English than in Spanish, and others may be roughly equally proficient in both Spanish and English. However, there is much less variability when we consider the instructional

*Jeannette Mancilla-Martinez* is an associate professor of Special Education at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, Nashville, Tennessee, USA; e-mail [jeannette.mancilla-martinez@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:jeannette.mancilla-martinez@vanderbilt.edu).

*Jin Kyoung Hwang* is an assistant Project Scientist at the University of California, Irvine, Irvine, California, USA; e-mail [jkhwang1@uci.edu](mailto:jkhwang1@uci.edu).

*Min Hyun Oh* is a doctoral candidate at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, Nashville, Tennessee, USA; e-mail [min.hyun.oh@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:min.hyun.oh@vanderbilt.edu).

language in U.S. classrooms, as English is the language of instruction for nearly all U.S. students (Gándara & Escamilla, 2016). This means that the vast majority of students from Spanish-speaking homes are formally instructed only in English and, consequently, they typically develop literacy skills only in English. This is important to understand because multilingualism (i.e., oral language proficiency across more than one language) is not synonymous with multiliteracy (i.e., reading and writing proficiency across more than one language). This point is particularly valuable to underscore, given its significant assessment and instructional implications.

One of the most persistent misconceptions is that multilingual students are at risk for low reading achievement *because* they speak a language other than English. It is thus not surprising that much research has been focused on language of instruction (i.e., which language to use when teaching multilingual learners), even though the vast majority of students in the United States are educated in English-only instructional contexts (Gándara & Escamilla, 2016). The fact is that multilingualism is not a risk factor for low reading achievement (Ramirez & Kuhl, 2017). However, economic disadvantage is a well-established risk factor for a wide range of negative life outcomes, including compromised reading achievement (e.g., Berkowitz et al., 2016; Ellis & Rowe, 2020; Wijekumar et al., 2018). Unfortunately, multilingual learners in the United States disproportionately live in or near poverty (Gibney & Henry, 2020; Romo et al., 2018), and children who grow up in or near poverty are more likely to struggle academically. This complicated context can create confusion for many educators. It is challenging for educators to separate out the fact that many (although certainly not all) multilingual learners may come from lower-income homes and that economic disadvantage—not multilingualism—is a risk factor for compromised academic achievement.

If educators are to provide multilingual learners with appropriate and equitable reading support, it is imperative that they understand multilingual language development. To this end, we begin with a brief overview of key factors that shape English reading comprehension (RC) and discuss assessment considerations specifically for multilingual learners.

## Simple View of Reading: Word Reading and Language Comprehension

Many factors shape and support students' RC development and achievement (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). At minimum, all students—including multilingual learners—must be able to read the printed words that appear in text (i.e., word reading) and to understand the meanings of the printed words they read (i.e., language comprehension). As described in the well-known Simple View of Reading model (SVR; Hoover & Gough, 1990), word reading and language comprehension thus represent two non-negotiable, foundational contributors to successful RC.

### Assessing Word Reading and Language Comprehension.

Word reading assessment may seem straightforward: students read printed words and are scored on how well they read the printed words. But the words students read might be real words (which may be sight words such as *the* or words that require decoding, such as *hat*) or non-words (which all require decoding but vary in complexity, such as *phim*). Furthermore, the words might be presented context-free (i.e., a list of words) or in context (i.e., in a sentence).

Arguably, more complex is the assessment of language comprehension, which is commonly done using vocabulary knowledge assessments. In contrast to word reading which entails a finite set of letter-sound correspondences, vocabulary knowledge that comprises language comprehension is infinite. Therefore, when assessing vocabulary, only a small subset of the universe of possible words and associated concepts can be assessed. Furthermore, teachers need to decide whether receptive (comprehension) and/or expressive (production) vocabulary will be assessed. But the enduring question is whether word reading and language comprehension should be assessed only in English for multilingual learners.

### Hold On! English-only Assessments Limit What We Know

While most multilingual learners are formally instructed only in English, concerns are often raised about assessing

## PAUSE AND PONDER

1. Are “multilingual learners” different from “English learners”?
2. Does multilingualism place students at-risk for low reading achievement?
3. English is the language of instruction across most U.S. classrooms. So, why is it problematic to use English-only language and reading assessments with multilingual learners?
4. How can I select language and reading assessments that are equitable for use with multilingual learners?
5. If I must use English-only language and reading assessments with multilingual learners, how should I interpret the results?

multilingual learners only in English. In fact, this is one of the most puzzling issues facing U.S. educators. Shouldn't assessments be administered only in English if instruction is provided only in English?

For word reading, it is unreasonable to expect multilingual learners to read words in a language that is not explicitly taught. That is, if formal Spanish instruction is not provided, students cannot be expected to know how to read words in Spanish proficiently. Thus, for word reading, it is often reasonable to assess multilingual learners only in English. In sharp contrast, even if students have not received formal Spanish instruction, Spanish-speaking multilingual learners may know the meanings of some words and associated concepts in Spanish from hearing and/or using Spanish at home. For this reason, relying exclusively on English-only vocabulary assessments—particularly with ELs, who are by definition not yet proficient in English—is highly problematic.

We know that vocabulary is essential for successful RC, and we also know that multilingual learners have vocabulary knowledge across more than one language (e.g., Spanish *and* English). The tricky part to reflect on is that having large vocabulary knowledge in the *same language* students are learning to read tends to be advantageous. It is true that students learning to read in English with a large English vocabulary base tend to have an advantage compared to multilingual learners who are learning to read in English, although they may not be fully proficient in English yet. This, however, should not lead educators to incorrectly assume that multilingualism is again a risk factor. In fact, having vocabulary knowledge in more than one language will help multilingual learners reap benefits for later reading and overall academic achievement (e.g., Prevoo et al., 2016; Ramirez & Kuhl, 2017). In other words, what matters is ensuring that students' vocabulary and conceptual knowledge development is supported, regardless of whether the words and associated concepts are known in Spanish or English.

A presumably easy solution might be to simply administer both Spanish and English vocabulary assessments. The catch here is that administering two *separate* Spanish and English vocabulary assessments treats multilingual learners as two monolinguals in one person (Arias & Friberg, 2017; Caesar & Kohler, 2007). When multilingual learners are assessed with a vocabulary test in Spanish and then with another test in English, results too often point to low Spanish-only vocabulary knowledge *and* low English-only vocabulary knowledge (Hoff, 2018; Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2011). Such a profile can alarm educators and misguidedly raise questions and concerns about

multilingual learners' "at-risk" status, as it implies that multilingual learners are just low on vocabulary in each language. Despite decades of research on multilingual language acquisition and development, it is frustrating that multilingual learners continue to be evaluated as two monolinguals in one person (Arias & Friberg, 2017; Caesar & Kohler, 2007). If administering separate Spanish and English vocabulary assessments is not the answer, what can educators do?

**Conceptually Scored Vocabulary Assessments.** The key point to underscore is that multilingual learners do not have two separate vocabulary systems, where there is a Spanish vocabulary system and a separate English vocabulary system. Rather, multilingual learners process language through a *shared conceptual* system (Kroll & Stewart, 1994). This means that their knowledge of *concepts*—not separate knowledge of Spanish words or English words—represents a more accurate reflection of multilingual learners' overall vocabulary knowledge. For this reason, vocabulary assessments that target the concepts multilingual learners know represent a more promising, equitable approach to assess multilingual learners' overall vocabulary knowledge (e.g., Hwang et al., 2020; Mancilla-Martinez, Hwang, Oh, & McClain, 2020; Mancilla-Martinez, Hwang, Oh, & Pokowitz, 2020).

Most vocabulary assessments allow responses in only one language, typically only in English in U.S. classrooms. However, there are Spanish–English conceptually scored vocabulary assessments that allow multilingual learners to respond in *either* the home (i.e., Spanish) or instructional (i.e., English) language. For instance, if an image of a *flag* is shown during an expressive vocabulary assessment, multilingual learners from Spanish-speaking homes can respond with *bandera* or *flag*. Regardless of the language of the response, the vocabulary item is scored as correct if they accurately identify the test item. The item is only scored as incorrect if neither *bandera* nor *flag* is known. This approach to vocabulary assessment may seem uncomplicated, intuitive, and sensible for multilingual learners. Unfortunately, this approach remains foreign to most educators. In fact, vocabulary is rarely assessed in school (e.g., Adlof & Hogan, 2019; Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2017). Without question, vocabulary assessment is time-intensive, and it may not be feasible to assess both receptive and expressive vocabulary. Although more research is needed, recent findings suggest that assessing expressive vocabulary—including expressive conceptually scored vocabulary—may best predict later English RC outcomes among U.S. multilingual students (e.g., Mancilla-Martinez, Hwang, Oh, & McClain, 2020).

## Current Study

This study was designed to inform elementary-grade educators' selection of word reading and vocabulary assessments for the large and growing population of multilingual learners is always with the goal of supporting English RC. Second- and fourth-grade multilingual learners from Spanish-speaking homes ( $N = 52$ ) in an English-only instructional context in the American South were followed for one academic year. We assessed their English RC; English word reading; and English-only, Spanish-only, and Spanish-English conceptually scored vocabulary by addressing the following questions:

1. How do multilingual learners perform on *English reading comprehension* across one academic year?
2. How do multilingual learners perform on *English word reading* across one academic year?
3. How do multilingual learners perform on *English-only, Spanish-only, and Spanish-English conceptually scored receptive and expressive vocabulary* across one academic year?

## Methods

### Participants

Second- and fourth-grade multilingual learners from Spanish-speaking homes ( $N = 52$ ) from three elementary schools in the American South were recruited during Year 3 of the larger study. Students were first recruited into the larger study when they were in kindergarten and second grade. Most students (91%) were U.S.-born and nearly half (46%; 16 in second grade and 8 in fourth grade) were formally classified as English learners (ELs) by the school district.

### Measures

Participating students took the state-mandated English RC assessment four times during the 2018–2019 school year (August, November, February, and May). Students' English word reading and vocabulary skills were assessed individually by Spanish-English bilingual research assistants in the fall and spring of the school year.

**English Reading Comprehension.** English RC was assessed with the Northwest Evaluation Association's (NWEA) *Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) Growth-Reading* subtest, a computer-based, multiple-choice assessment developed to measure achievement and growth in reading (e.g., identify key ideas, text structures). The school district employed *MAP Growth* to track and monitor students' progress over the school years.

**English Word Reading.** English word reading was assessed with *Test of Word Reading Efficiency-2 (TOWRE-2; Torgesen et al., 2012)*, comprised of two subtests—Sight Word Efficiency (SWE) and Phonemic Decoding Efficiency (PDE). Each subtest lasts 45 seconds and requires that students read aloud a list of words (real English words for SWE and non-words for PDE) fast and accurately during that time.

**English-only, Spanish-only, and Spanish-English Conceptually Scored Vocabulary.** English receptive vocabulary was assessed with the widely used *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-4 (PPVT-4; Dunn & Dunn, 2007)*, which measures students' ability to point to a picture that accurately corresponds to the target word. Spanish receptive vocabulary was assessed with the parallel Spanish version of the *PPVT-4*, the *Test de Vocabulario en Imágenes Peabody (TVIP; Dunn et al., 1986)*. Spanish-English conceptually scored receptive vocabulary was assessed with the *Receptive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test-4: Spanish-Bilingual Edition* (Martin, 2013a). The examiner started with students' dominant language (Spanish or English) as reported by parents, asking students to point to a picture corresponding to a target word. This vocabulary assessment offered students the chance to respond in their other language if they responded incorrectly in the language first assessed. In other words, if a student responded incorrectly in English (or Spanish) in the first attempt, the examiner repeated the word in Spanish (or English) and offered the student another chance to respond.

English expressive vocabulary was assessed with the *Picture Vocabulary subtest of the Woodcock Muñoz Language Survey-III* (Woodcock et al., 2017). Students were asked to label the target item when the examiner pointed to a picture. Spanish expressive vocabulary knowledge was measured with the Spanish version of the subtest, *Vocabulario sobre Dibujos* (Woodcock et al., 2017). The *Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test-4: Spanish-Bilingual Edition* (Martin, 2013b) was used to measure Spanish-English conceptually scored expressive vocabulary. Students were presented with a picture and were asked to label it in either Spanish or English. If students could not respond in their dominant language (e.g., Spanish) in the first attempt, they were given another chance to respond in the other language (e.g., English).

### Analysis Plan

We first examined our participants' scores on all of the measures (i.e., RC, word reading, and vocabulary) to see how they performed in comparison to the norm (i.e.,

national average). We also examined levels of performance by English proficiency status (EL vs. EP) by conducting a series of analysis of variance (ANOVA).

## Results

Table 1 displays the means and standard deviations of students' English RC scores across the four time points by grade level. Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations of English word reading and vocabulary across the two time points by grade level.

### **Research Question 1: Multilingual Learners' English RC Performance**

Table 1 shows our sample's average English RC scores, as well as the national average (i.e., norms) for comparison purposes. As the table shows, second- and fourth-grade students' average English RC scores were lower than the national average at all four time points, but students did show growth on English RC over time. In other words, students' spring scores were higher than their fall scores. As expected, fourth-grade students' scores were higher than those of the second graders, but English RC growth from the beginning (fall) to the end (spring) of the school year was greater for second graders (19.46-score difference) compared to fourth graders (10.89-score difference). Although second graders showed English RC growth, this growth was insufficient to catch up to the national average. For both grade levels, the gap between our participants' means and the national average was the largest at the beginning of the school year and tended to converge toward the end of the school year.

Figure 1 displays students' average English RC scores by English proficiency status. ELs performed significantly lower across all time points compared to their EP peers. Yet, EL students showed steeper growth during the first part of the school year (i.e., August–November). However, their rate of growth decelerated during later part of the school year (i.e., November–May). EP students' English RC development was more gradual throughout the school year, but also decelerated toward the end of the school year.

### **Research Question 2: Multilingual Learners' English Word Reading Performance**

Table 2 displays our sample's average standard scores and standard deviations on English word reading. In general, a standard score of 100 in standardized assessments indicates an average score. As can be seen from Table 2, our participants' average English word reading scores

(combined real word recognition and non-word decoding scores) were 92.40 in the fall and 92.52 in the spring. This means that our multilingual student participants' average English word reading standard scores fell at the low-average range (around the 30<sup>th</sup> percentile). Furthermore, students' standard scores in non-word decoding were lower than their real word recognition scores in both fall and spring.

Figure 2 displays the average standard scores on English word reading (combined real word recognition and non-word decoding scores), real word recognition, and non-word decoding by multilingual learners' English proficiency status during fall. We only plotted students' fall scores because of the similarity between their fall and spring scores. That is, the main finding remains the same whether we plot fall or spring average scores. The line that goes across the 100 mark in Figure 2 indicates the average standard score, which reveals that our sample's English word reading skills were lower than that of the national average (i.e., below the average standard score of 100). Furthermore, compared to EP students, EL students had significantly lower scores in English word reading, real word recognition, and non-word decoding.

### **Research Question 3: Multilingual Learners' Vocabulary Performance**

**Receptive Vocabulary.** Table 2 displays multilingual learners' English-only, Spanish-only, and Spanish-English conceptually scored receptive vocabulary. Our multilingual learners' average scores fell in the low-average range in English-only and well below average in Spanish-only. In sharp contrast, multilingual learners' performance on Spanish–English conceptually scored vocabulary was *above* average (i.e., higher than 100) across both time points.

Figure 2 presents the average standard scores in English-only, Spanish-only, and Spanish–English conceptually scored receptive vocabulary by English proficiency status during fall. The figure shows that, while EL and EP students had below-average scores on English-only and Spanish-only receptive vocabulary, their scores were *above* average on the Spanish–English conceptually scored assessment. However, the graph also shows that ELs had lower scores than their EP peers across all three types of receptive vocabulary.

**Expressive Vocabulary.** As Table 2 shows that multilingual learners' standard scores fell well below average based on monolingual norms in both English-only and especially in Spanish-only expressive vocabulary. Again in sharp contrast, students' Spanish–English conceptually

**Table 1**  
**Multilingual Learners' English Reading Comprehension Sample Means and Standard Deviations**

	August			November			February			May		
	Sample	Norms	Sample	Norms	Sample	Norms	Sample	Norms	Sample	Norms	Sample	Norms
N	M (SD)	M (SD)	n	M (SD)	M (SD)	n	M (SD)	M (SD)	n	M (SD)	M (SD)	n
Total	50	175.02 (20.08)	48	186.15 (16.97)	49	189.55 (17.14)	49	190.14 (17.02)	26	180.19 (14.44)	26	185.57 (15.49)
Second Grade	26	160.73 (10.22)	25	174.40 (11.93)	26	178.88 (13.56)	26	181.20 (15.05)	23	201.61 (12.06)	23	204.83 (16.31)
Fourth Grade	24	190.50 (16.27)	23	198.91 (11.51)	23	202.50 (16.25)	23	202.50 (16.25)	23	201.39 (12.08)	23	204.83 (16.31)

Note. English reading comprehension was assessed by the Measures of Academic Progress Growth—Reading Test (Northwest Evaluation Association [NWEA], 2011). We used the NWEA's RIT scores, fall-normed scores for August, winter-normed scores for November and February, and spring-normed scores for May.

scored vocabulary performance fell in the *above average* range at both time points.

Figure 2 presents the average fall standard scores on English-only, Spanish-only, and Spanish–English conceptually scored expressive vocabulary by English proficiency status during fall. EL students' scores tended to be lower than those of their EP peers on English-only and Spanish–English conceptually scored expressive vocabulary. However, ELs and EP students performed similarly low on Spanish-only expressive vocabulary.

## What Findings Mean for Assessment Selection and Interpretation

Our findings offer educators guidance for making more informed decisions about the types of word reading and especially vocabulary assessments they can use with multilingual learners. Selecting appropriate word reading and vocabulary assessments for multilingual learners can lead to valuable information for supporting elementary-age multilingual learners' English RC, which we found to be low among our sample. Across one academic year, we focused on second- and fourth-grade multilingual students from Spanish-speaking homes instructed only in English in the American South. The two most practically significant findings were that (1) supporting English word reading development, and especially students' decoding skills, continues to be essential and (2) reliance on monolingual vocabulary assessments—which usually means English-only vocabulary assessments—severely limits what we can learn about multilingual learners' language knowledge. Below, we discuss the implications of our findings.

### Support Multilingual Learners' English Reading Comprehension

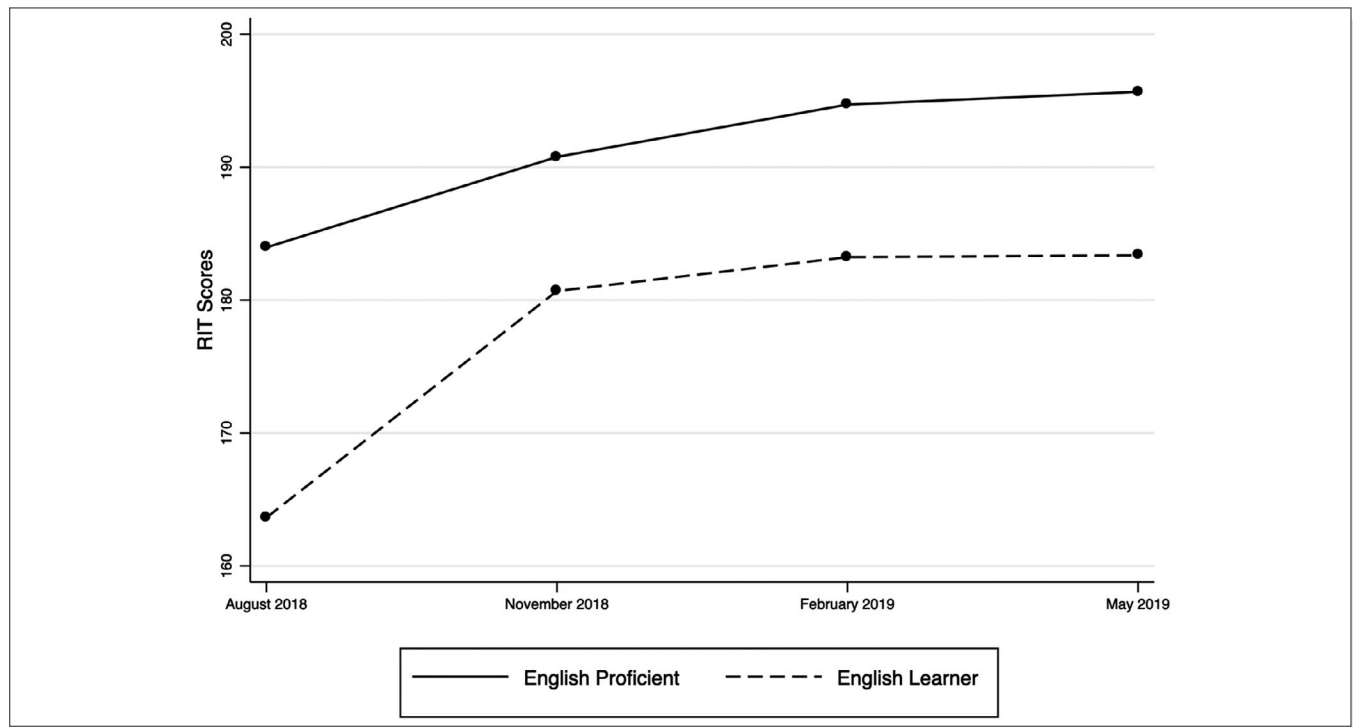
Across one academic year, multilingual learners gradually built their English RC skills, but their growth rate was not enough to reach grade-level expectations. Further, fourth graders demonstrated higher English RC achievement compared to second graders. This finding was not surprising because fourth graders have had more years of schooling and thus more exposure to formal English literacy instruction. However, second graders showed faster English RC growth. This finding aligns with previous research that points to greater reading growth rates in the earlier years of multilingual learners' schooling (e.g., Farnia & Geva, 2013). It was also not surprising to find that EP multilingual students generally outperformed their EL peers, given that students with greater English proficiency would be more proficient on *English* RC. Somewhat less

**Table 2**  
**Multilingual Learners' Word Reading and Vocabulary Sample Means and Standard Deviations**

		Standard Scores					
		Fall			Spring		
		<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
English Word Reading							
Total Scores	Total	52	92.40	15.59	50	92.52	16.98
	Second	27	95.11	14.51	26	95.35	17.64
	Fourth	25	89.48	16.47	24	89.46	16.05
Real Word Recognition	Total	52	93.21	16.47	50	93.98	16.35
	Second	27	96.56	16.30	26	97.38	17.92
	Fourth	25	89.60	16.21	24	90.29	13.91
Non-word Decoding	Total	52	92.23	14.51	50	90.52	21.48
	Second	27	94.04	12.59	26	91.27	24.68
	Fourth	25	90.28	16.37	24	89.71	17.88
Receptive Vocabulary							
English	Total	52	89.96	13.55	50	92.12	13.11
	Second	27	90.74	9.94	26	93.96	9.45
	Fourth	25	89.12	16.79	24	90.13	16.16
Spanish	Total	52	79.77	17.84	48	79.81	16.76
	Second	27	81.67	14.33	24	80.46	16.56
	Fourth	25	77.72	21.10	24	79.17	17.29
Spanish-English Conceptually scored	Total	51	114.41	14.26	49	116.61	15.38
	Second	26	115.69	12.99	25	118.60	11.97
	Fourth	25	113.08	15.63	24	114.54	18.32
Expressive Vocabulary							
English	Total	51	75.59	13.09	49	73.35	14.15
	Second	27	77.74	11.98	25	73.84	15.67
	Fourth	24	73.17	14.10	24	72.83	12.69
Spanish	Total	51	48.59	12.82	49	48.55	14.56
	Second	27	48.15	12.58	25	50.36	17.24
	Fourth	24	49.08	13.33	24	46.67	11.17
Spanish-English Conceptually scored	Total	52	107.87	12.93	49	110.76	14.67
	Second	27	109.59	10.51	25	114.88	11.84
	Fourth	25	106.00	15.12	24	106.46	16.29

Note. English Word Reading Total Scores = Combined scores of Real Word Recognition (Sight Word Efficiency subtest of TOWRE) and Non-word Decoding (Phonemic Decoding Efficiency subtest of TOWRE) tasks.

**Figure 1**  
**Multilingual Learners' English Reading Comprehension Average Scores Across the Academic Year by English Proficiency Status**



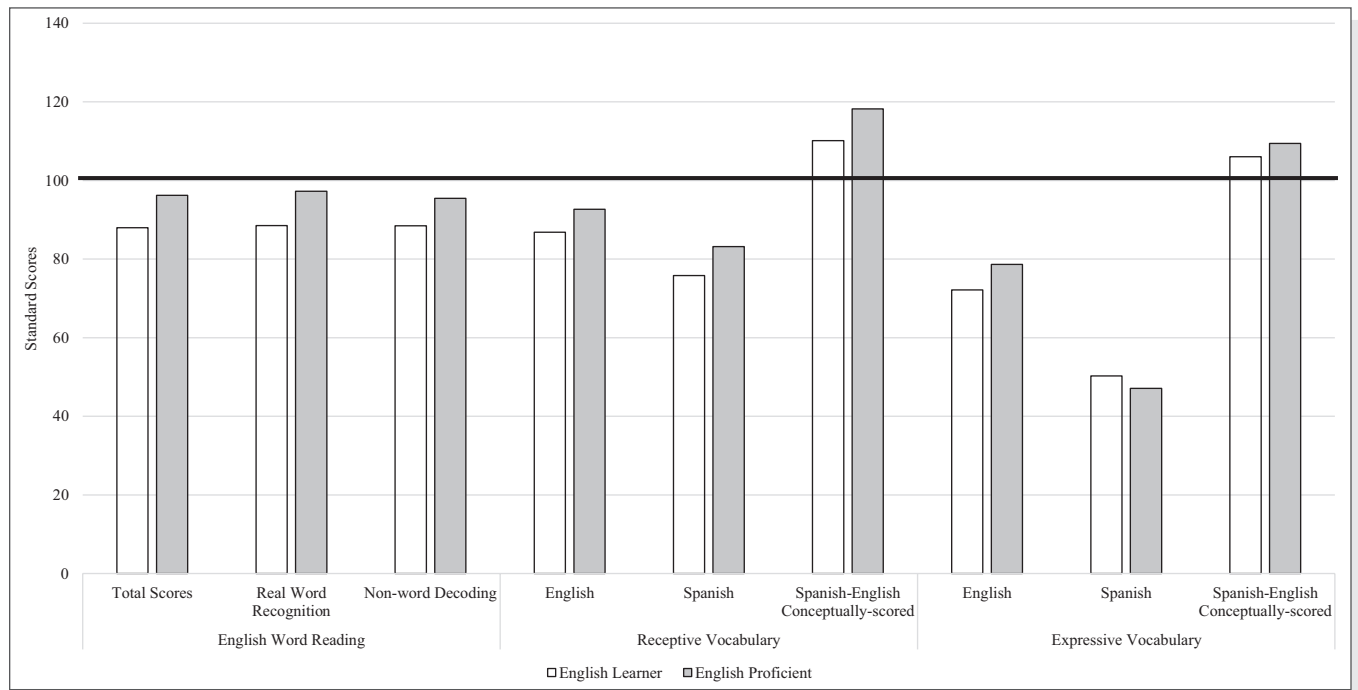
expected was that ELs showed steeper RC growth during the first part of the academic year (from August to November) than EP students.

Our findings suggest that, for ELs, the influence of schooling on English RC appears to be particularly salient during the beginning of the academic year. It may be that the often-cited summer reading loss is at play (e.g., Bowers & Schwarz, 2018; Lawrence, 2012), where students show loss in reading or language skills during the summer months and show steep improvement once the school year starts. In fact, previous studies have found multilingual learners to show considerable loss in reading achievement or vocabulary knowledge during the summer, but greatly improve during the school year (Vaughn et al., 2018). The strong influence of schooling for ELs at the beginning of the year warrants instructional approaches that provide meaningful, language-rich opportunities to prepare multilingual learners for achieving grade-level RC.

Our findings also raise the question of whether the influence of schooling would be similar or different under the current educational challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is estimated that students will lose 30% of their reading gains due to the disruption in regular instruction (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020). More concerning

is that the past academic year will likely disproportionately affect historically marginalized student populations (National Academy of Education, 2021), like our sample of multilingual learners. If standardized state-level assessments are administered for accountability purposes and to gauge student progress, results must be interpreted with extreme caution and with caveats in mind. The validity of such standardized test results can be expected to be lessened for a multitude of interrelated reasons, not the least of which is the missed instructional time (i.e., opportunity to learn) the majority of students have experienced. Furthermore, students in “virtual-only” contexts during the pandemic have necessarily experienced differential opportunities to learn. Indeed, ELs and students from low-income homes experienced the most increased rates of absenteeism during the pandemic, with students attending virtually experiencing higher rates of chronic absenteeism (Patrick et al., 2021). It will be imperative to attend to the participation rate and distribution of students who get tested as this may be non-random (National Academy of Education, 2021), where certain subgroups of students (e.g., students who remained in virtual-only settings) may not be tested, potentially limiting what we can learn from the results.

**Figure 2**  
**Average Standard Scores for Word Reading, Receptive Vocabulary, and Expressive Vocabulary by Multilingual Learners' English Proficiency Status**



Note. The solid line across 100 indicates the average standard score. Real Word Recognition = Sight Word Efficiency Subtest of TOWRE. Non-word Decoding = Phonemic Decoding Efficiency Subtest of TOWRE. English Word Reading Total Scores = Combined scores of Real Word Recognition and Non-Word Decoding.

Despite educators' continued efforts to provide high-quality instruction, ELs appear to be particularly vulnerable to educational setbacks without consistent opportunities to read, write, listen, and speak during the academic year (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020). It is thus essential that teachers incorporate explicit, integrated English reading development opportunities for multilingual learners in general, and ELs in particular, to help them access increasingly complex texts and achieve grade-level reading skills (Uro et al., 2020).

### **Support the Development of Efficient Decoding Skills**

Despite clear evidence of the important role of word reading in all learners' reading development, debates persist about the necessity of explicit word reading instruction (Ehri, 2020; Goldenberg, 2020). Our findings underscore that multilingual learners' word reading should *not* be overlooked. On average, our multilingual students—in both lower and upper elementary grades—demonstrated *below-average* English word reading

skills. This means that they were still in the process of developing their word reading skills and had considerable room for growth.

Most practically, students had higher scores on real word recognition than on non-word decoding. This finding underscores the need for explicit English word reading instruction, even in the upper elementary grades. Especially after the early elementary years, students are more likely to encounter less-frequent vocabulary words across content areas. Thus, the ability to efficiently decode unfamiliar words—many of which will be multisyllabic—remains critical. It is concerning that studies often report an instructional shift between the lower and upper elementary grades, where the focus of reading instruction switches from foundational reading skills, such as word reading, to RC (Chall & Jacobs, 1983; Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009). Regardless of multilingual students' grade level or English proficiency status, our results show that it would be misguided to overlook their decoding skills in later grades. Decoding skills remain an essential component for successful word reading and RC (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014).

## Minimize Reliance on Monolingual Vocabulary Measures

Our study shows that accounting for the distributed nature of multilingual learners' vocabulary knowledge best captures the richness of their vocabulary knowledge. Mirroring results from previous studies, we found below-average English-only and Spanish-only vocabulary knowledge among the multilingual learners in our study (Gross et al., 2014; Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2017; Oh & Mancilla-Martinez, 2020). Furthermore, students generally showed an English-dominant receptive and expressive vocabulary knowledge profile. This is expected, as U.S. multilinguals often shift to English as their primary and preferred language due to the increased exposure and use of English in schools (Castilla-Earls et al., 2019).

Most importantly, regardless of English proficiency status (i.e., EL or EP), multilingual learners performed *above* national norms on Spanish–English receptive and expressive conceptually scored vocabulary. This result converges with previous studies' caution against relying on monolingual vocabulary assessments with multilinguals, in order to prevent partial and misinformed understandings about their language skills (e.g., Arias & Friberg, 2017; Caesar & Kohler, 2007; Oh & Mancilla-Martinez, 2020). If conceptually scored vocabulary measures had not been used in this study, multilingual learners' vocabulary profiles would likely have been flagged as “at-risk” based on their performance on only the Spanish monolingual or English monolingual vocabulary assessments.

## Expressive Vocabulary as an Instructional Target

Compared to receptive vocabulary, our results revealed limited English-only and Spanish-only *expressive* vocabulary growth across grade levels and English proficiency status. Similarly, although our multilingual learners evidenced comparable receptive and expressive growth only on conceptually scored vocabulary, their expressive knowledge was still relatively lower than their receptive knowledge. In line with recent studies pointing to expressive vocabulary as an especially important domain for multilingual learners' language and literacy achievement (e.g., Hwang et al., 2020; Mancilla-Martinez, Hwang, Oh, & McClain, 2020; Oh & Mancilla-Martinez, 2020; Ribot et al., 2018), our findings highlight the need to provide multilingual learners—especially ELs—more opportunities to *produce* language. This means multilingual learners require intentional opportunities to practice using new words during instructional time, with teachers and peers.

## Final Thoughts

When assessing the word reading and language comprehension skills of multilingual students, it is imperative to remember that their developmental experience—not their cognitive capacity nor learning potential—differs from that of their English monolingual peers. Multilingual learners are by definition exposed to a language other than English. As such, assessment selection matters for equitable instruction. Whenever possible, vocabulary assessments in particular should not be administered only in English. Instead, teachers should allow multilingual learners to use their full linguistic knowledge when responding. If monolingual vocabulary measures are used, educators must remember that the results only offer information on *one* of the two languages that multilingual learners actually know. As such, caution must be exercised to avoid flagging students as “at-risk” when the issue may simply be that the available assessments do not lend themselves to capture the totality of what multilingual learners know.

Indeed, our findings underscore that conceptually scored vocabulary represents a promising assessment approach for multilingual learners. At the same time, we recognize that the U.S. teacher workforce continues to face a shortage of multilingual teachers qualified to work with multilingual learners (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). This, in turn, raises valid concerns about the feasibility of using conceptually scored vocabulary assessments in U.S. classrooms.

We strongly advocate for the allocation of resources to address the systemic barriers that have long compromised multilingual learners' opportunities—to learn. At a minimum, educators should be provided with ongoing professional development opportunities on multilingual language development. Without a scientific understanding of multilingual language development, it will be nearly impossible for educators to recognize that English-only, and even Spanish-only, assessments offer partial insight into the totality of multilingual learners' language knowledge. RC is language-based. For this reason, language knowledge is precisely what we must build on to support students' RC achievement and development. We also acknowledge that simply understanding the limitations of utilizing monolingual assessments with multilingual learners is insufficient. However, acknowledgment itself represents a concrete and actionable first step. By recognizing how multilingual learners could be better understood, we can achieve more equitable evaluation practices and plan instruction to support multilingual learners' language and reading achievement.

## TAKE ACTION!

1. Acknowledge that multilingual learners—even in upper elementary grades—may need explicit decoding instruction to build foundational reading skills for successful reading comprehension.
2. Provide opportunities for multilingual learners to *produce* language, such as talking or writing about new concepts or words learned.
3. Think about the following:
  - a. How can I support multilingual learners to use their full linguistic repertoire to make meaning of words, concepts and texts?
  - b. Am I measuring and understanding multilingual learners' language and literacy skills in equitable ways?
  - c. If I must rely on English-only assessments, what insight about their knowledge base may be overlooked?

## Conflict of Interest

None

## REFERENCES

- Adlof, S. M., & Hogan, T. P. (2019). If we don't look, we won't see: Measuring language development to inform literacy instruction. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 6(2), 210–217. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732219839075>
- Arias, G., & Friberg, J. (2017). Bilingual language assessment: Contemporary versus recommended practice in American schools. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 48, 1–15. [https://doi.org/10.1044/2016\\_LSHSS-15-0900](https://doi.org/10.1044/2016_LSHSS-15-0900)
- Berkowitz, R., Moore, H., Astor, R. A., & Benbenishty, R. (2016). A research synthesis of the associations between socioeconomic background, inequality, school climate, and academic achievement. *Review of Educational Research*, 87(2), 425–469. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316669821>
- Bowers, L. M., & Schwarz, I. (2018). Preventing summer learning loss: Results of a summer literacy program for students from low-SES homes. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 34(2), 99–116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10573569.2017.1344943>
- Caesar, L. G., & Kohler, P. D. (2007). The state of school-based bilingual assessment: Actual practice versus recommended guidelines. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 38(3), 190–200. [https://doi.org/10.1044/0161-1461\(2007\)020](https://doi.org/10.1044/0161-1461(2007)020)
- Castilla-Earls, A., Francis, D., Iglesias, A., & Davidson, K. (2019). The impact of the Spanish-to-English proficiency shift on the grammaticality of English learners. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 1–16. [https://doi.org/10.1044/2018\\_JSLHR-L18-0324](https://doi.org/10.1044/2018_JSLHR-L18-0324)
- Chall, J. S., & Jacobs, V. A. (1983). Writing and reading in the elementary grades: Developmental trends among low-SES children. *Language Arts*, 60(5).
- Dunn, L. M., & Dunn, D. M. (2007). *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, 4<sup>th</sup> edition*. Pearson.
- Dunn, L., Padilla, E., Lugo, D., & Dunn, L. (1986). *Test de Vocabulario en Imágenes Peabody*. American Guidance Service.
- Ehri, L. C. (2020). The science of learning to read words: A case for systematic phonics instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 55(S1), S45–S60. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.334>
- Ellis, S., & Rowe, A. (2020). Literacy, social justice and inclusion: a large-scale design experiment to narrow the attainment gap linked to poverty. *Support for Learning*, 35(4), 418–439. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12324>
- Farnia, F., & Geva, E. (2013). Growth and predictors of change in English language learners' reading comprehension. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 36(4), 389–421. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jrir.12003>
- Gándara, P., & Escamilla, K. (2016). Bilingual education in the United States. In O. Garcia, O. Garcia, A. Lin, & S. May (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education* (pp. 1–14). Springer.
- Goldenberg, C. (2020). Reading wars, reading science, and English learners. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 55(S1), S131–S144. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.340>
- Gibney, D. T., & Henry, G. (2020). Who teaches English learners? A study of the quality, experience, and credentials of teachers of English learners in a new immigrant destination. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 90. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.102967>
- Gross, M., Buac, M., & Kaushanskaya, M. (2014). Conceptual scoring of receptive and expressive vocabulary measures in simultaneous and sequential bilingual children. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 23, 574–586. [https://doi.org/10.1044/2014\\_AJSLP-13-0026](https://doi.org/10.1044/2014_AJSLP-13-0026)
- Hoff, E. (2018). Bilingual development in children of immigrant families. *Child Development*, 12(2), 80–86. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12262>
- Hoover, W. A., & Gough, P. B. (1990). The simple view of reading. *Reading and Writing*, 2(2), 127–160. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00401799>
- Hwang, J. K., Mancilla-Martinez, J., McClain, J., Oh, M., & Flores, I. (2020). Spanish-speaking English learners' English language and literacy skills: The predictive role of conceptually-scored vocabulary. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 41(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0142716419000365>
- Krogstad, J. M. (2020). *Hispanics have accounted for more than half of total U.S. population growth since 2010*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/10/hispanics-have-accounted-for-more-than-half-of-total-u-s-population-growth-since-2010>
- Kroll, J. F., & Stewart, E. (1994). Category interference in translation and picture naming: Evidence for asymmetric connections between bilingual memory representations. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 33(2), 149–174. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jmla.1994.1008>
- Kuhfeld, M., & Tarasawa, B. (2020). The COVID-19 slide: What summer learning loss can tell us about the potential impact of school closures on student academic achievement. Retrieved from [https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2020/05/Collaborative-Brief\\_Covid19-Slide-APR20.pdf](https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2020/05/Collaborative-Brief_Covid19-Slide-APR20.pdf)
- Lawrence, J. F. (2012). English vocabulary trajectories of students whose parents speak a language other than English: steep trajectories and sharp summer setback. *Reading and Writing*, 25, 1131–1141. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-011-9305-z>
- Mancilla-Martinez, J., & Lesaux, N. K. (2011). The gap between Spanish-Speakers' word reading and word knowledge: A longitudinal study. *Child Development*, 82, 1544–1560.
- Mancilla-Martinez, J., & Lesaux, N. K. (2017). Early indicators of later English reading comprehension outcomes among children from Spanish-speaking homes. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 21(5), 428–448. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888438.2017.1320402>
- Mancilla-Martinez, J., Hwang, J. K., Oh, M., & McClain, J. B. (2020). Early elementary grade dual language learners from Spanish-speaking homes struggling with English reading comprehension:

- The dormant role of language skills. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 112(5), 880–894. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000402>
- Mancilla-Martinez, J., Hwang, J. K., Oh, M. H., & Pokowitz, E. L. (2020). Patterns of development in Spanish-English conceptually-scored vocabulary among elementary-age dual language learners. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 63(9), 3084–3099. [https://doi.org/10.1044/2020\\_JSLHR-20-00056](https://doi.org/10.1044/2020_JSLHR-20-00056)
- Martin, N. (2013a). *Receptive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test—4th Edition: Spanish-Bilingual Edition (ROWPVT-4:SBE)*. Academic Therapy Publications.
- Martin, N. (2013b). *Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test—4th Edition: Spanish-Bilingual Edition (EOWPVT-4:SBE)*. Academic Therapy Publications.
- National Academy of Education. (2021). Educational assessments in the COVID-19 era and beyond. Retrieved from <https://naeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Educational-Assessments-in-the-COVID-19-Era-and-Beyond.pdf>
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017). *Promoting the educational success of children and youth learning English: Promising futures*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/24677>
- Northwest Evaluation Association [NWEA]. (2011). Technical Manual for Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) and Measures of Academic Progress Primary Grades (MPG). NWEA.
- Office of English Language Acquisition. (2019). The top languages spoken by English learners (ELs) in the United States. Retrieved from [https://ncela.ed.gov/files/fast\\_facts/olea-top-languages-fact-sheet-20191021-508.pdf](https://ncela.ed.gov/files/fast_facts/olea-top-languages-fact-sheet-20191021-508.pdf)
- Oh, M., & Mancilla-Martinez, J. (2020). Comparing vocabulary knowledge conceptualizations among Spanish-English dual language learners in a new destination state. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 52(1), 369–382. [https://doi.org/10.1044/2020\\_LSHSS-20-00031](https://doi.org/10.1044/2020_LSHSS-20-00031)
- Patrick, S. K., Woods, S. C., Bala, N., & Santelli, F. A. (2021). Schooling during COVID-19: Fall semester trends from six Tennessee districts. *Tennessee Education Research Alliance*.
- Perfetti, C., & Stafura, J. (2014). Word knowledge in a theory of reading comprehension. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 18, 22–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888438.2013.827687>
- Prevo, M. J. L., Malda, M., Mesman, J., & van IJzendoorn, M. H., (2016). Within- and cross-language relations between oral language proficiency and school outcomes in bilingual children with an immigrant background: A meta-analytical study. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(1), 237–276. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315584685>
- Ramirez, N. F., & Kuhl, P., (2017). The brain science of bilingualism. *Young Children*, 72, 38–44.
- RAND Reading Study Group. (2002). Reading for understanding: Toward an R&D program in reading comprehension. Retrieved from [https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1465.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1465.html)
- Ribot, K. M., Hoff, E., & Burridge, A. (2018). Language use contributes to expressive language growth: Evidence from bilingual children. *Child Development*, 89(3), 929–940. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12770>
- Romanowski, P. (2020). Introduction: The many faces of multilingualism. In M. Guardado & P. Romanowski (Eds.), *The many faces of multilingualism: Language status, learning and use across contexts* (pp. 1–10). De Gruyter.
- Romo, H. D., & Thomas, K. J. A., & García, E. E. (2018). Changing demographics of dual language learners and English learners: Implications for school success. *Social Policy Report*, 31(2), 1–35. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2379-3988.2018.tb00028.x>
- Sanacore, J., & Palumbo, A. (2009). Understanding the fourth-grade slump: Our point of view. *The Educational Forum*, 73(1), 67–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131720802539648>
- Sugarman, J. (2019). Legal protections for K-12 English learner and immigrant-background students. Retrieved from [https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/EL-Insight\\_Legal-Framwork\\_Final.pdf](https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/EL-Insight_Legal-Framwork_Final.pdf)
- Sugarman, J., & Lazarin, M. (2020). Educating English learners during the COVID-19 pandemic: Policy ideas for states and school districts. Retrieved from <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-english-learners-covid-19-final.pdf>
- Torgesen, J. K., Wagner, R. K., & Rashotte, C. A. (2012). *Test of Word Reading Efficiency—Second Edition (TOWRE-2)*. Pro-Ed.
- Uro, G., Lai, D., Alsace, T., & Corcoran, A. (2020). Supporting English learners in the COVID-19 crisis. Retrieved from [https://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/domain/35/publication/20docs/CGCS\\_ELL%20and%20COVID\\_web\\_v2.pdf](https://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/domain/35/publication/20docs/CGCS_ELL%20and%20COVID_web_v2.pdf)
- Vaughn, S., Martinez, L. R., Williams, K. J., Miciak, J., Fall, A.-M., & Roberts, G. (2018). Efficacy of a high school extensive reading intervention for English learners with reading difficulties. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 111(3), 373–386. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000289>
- Wijekumar, K., Meyer, B. J. F., Lei, P., Hernandez, A. C., & August, D. L. (2018). Improving content area reading comprehension of Spanish speaking English learners in grades 4 and 5 using web-based text structure instruction. *Reading and Writing*, 31, 1969–1996. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-017-9802-9>
- Woodcock, R. W., Alvarado, C. G., & Ruef, M. L. (2017). *Woodcock-Muñoz language survey III*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

## MORE TO EXPLORE

The following resources provide additional guidance for supporting multilingual learners' language and reading development:

- Ascenzi-Moreno, L., & Quiñones, R. (2020). Bringing bilingualism to the center of guided reading instruction. *The Reading Teacher*, 74(2), 137–146. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1922>
- Calderón, M. E., Dove, M. G., Fenner, D. S., Gottlieb, M., Honingsfeld, A., Singer, T. W., Slakk, S., Soto, I., & Zacarian, D. (2020). *Breaking down the wall: Essential shifts for English learners' success*. Corwin Press.
- Cloud, N., Genessee, F., & Hamayan, E. (2009). *Literacy instruction for English language learners: A teacher's guide to research-based practices*. Heinemann.
- Martínez, R. A. (2018). Beyond the *English learner* label: Recognizing the richness of bi/multilingual students' linguistic repertoires. *The Reading Teacher*, 71(5), 515–522. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1679>