

Creating Accessible Instruction for Multilingual Learners with Disabilities

Strategies that Overlap UDL, Language Supports, and IEP Goals

Purpose & Context

Educators face a critical challenge in supporting multilingual learners (MLs) who may also have disabilities. Misidentification can lead to overidentification (identifying a language difference as a disability) or underidentification (missing a disability due to attributing challenges solely to language acquisition). This guide provides practical tools for designing accessible instruction that meets the needs of MLs with disabilities while also helping teams more effectively discern whether difficulties stem from a disability, a language barrier, or both.

Disability vs. Language Barrier: Key Considerations

Indicator	May Suggest Language Barrier	May Suggest Disability
Performance Across Languages	Student demonstrates similar skills in their first language (L1) and English in non-academic settings.	Difficulties are present in both primary language and English, even with familiar content.
Progress Over Time	Steady improvement in English skills with targeted language instruction.	Minimal progress despite high-quality, targeted instruction over time.
Cultural & Educational Background	Academic gaps align with interrupted schooling or differences in curriculum.	Academic gaps persist despite consistent access to high-quality instruction.
Error Patterns	Errors are typical of second language acquisition stages.	Errors are atypical for language learning or persist beyond expected timelines.
Response to Intervention	Improves with language-focused supports.	Little improvement even with targeted language and skill supports.

Note: Determining eligibility for special education requires a **comprehensive** evaluation by a multidisciplinary team, considering multiple data points and cultural/linguistic factors.

UDL-Aligned Instruction for MLs with Disabilities:

- Provide multiple means of representation (visuals, translated materials, graphic organizers).
- Embed opportunities for oral language practice tied to academic vocabulary.
- Use sentence frames and word banks to scaffold expressive language.
- Pair written and verbal instructions with visual cues or demonstrations.
- Integrate students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds into content & examples
- Offer flexible ways for students to demonstrate understanding (oral, written, project-based).

Integrating Language Supports with IEP Goals

IEP Goal Area	Example Goal	Integrated Language Support
Literacy	Student will increase reading comprehension by identifying main ideas with 80% accuracy.	Pre-teach vocabulary using visuals and L1 connections before reading.
Math	Student will solve multi-step word problems with 75% accuracy.	Highlight and define math vocabulary; provide sentence starters for explaining reasoning.
Social-Emotional	Student will initiate peer interactions during group activities in 4/5 opportunities.	Model and role-play sentence stems for initiating conversation in English.

Collaborative Team Approach

- Include ESL/EL teachers, special educators, general educators, and related service providers in planning.
- Review student work and progress data in both L1 and English.
- Share strategies across staff to ensure consistency in supports.

- Engage families to gather cultural and language background information.

Quick Implementation Checklist

- Identify 1–2 high-priority academic or functional goals for the student.
- Add a language support strategy to each goal.
- Review and adapt materials to ensure visual and linguistic accessibility.
- Schedule regular team check-ins to review progress.

Common Pitfalls & How to Avoid Them

- Using only English-language assessment tools to determine disability.
- Assuming slow language acquisition equals a disability.
- Providing language supports in isolation from IEP goals.
- Not considering cultural relevance in instructional materials.

Action Starter: Try Tomorrow

- Identify one upcoming lesson and add a visual support plus a sentence frame for key vocabulary.
- Collaborate with the EL teacher to pre-teach vocabulary to MLs with disabilities before the lesson.
- Choose one strategy from this guide to integrate into your daily instruction.