



Advancing equitable assessment for multilingual learners of English (MLEs)

Across educational systems, multilingual learners of English (MLEs)—sometimes referred to as “English learners (EL)” —are frequently assessed with instruments designed for monolingual English speakers. This structural misalignment produces predictable distortions: assessments intended to measure content knowledge often measure English proficiency instead. When linguistic complexity exceeds the intended construct, results become confounded, and students’ academic competence is underestimated.

The need for equitable assessment is intensified by shifting demographics, increasing accountability pressures, and longstanding opportunity gaps. Multilingual learners of English have historically represented a growing and heterogeneous population, including students with continuous formal schooling as well as those with interrupted educational experiences. Yet assessment systems have not consistently evolved to reflect this complexity. The consequences are significant: misidentification for special education, underrepresentation in advanced coursework, inaccurate grading, and misinterpretation of academic growth.

Equitable assessment is not a call to reduce rigor or expectations. Rather, it is a commitment to ensure that rigor is conceptual and disciplinary, not a byproduct of linguistic gatekeeping.

Defining equitable MLE assessment

At its core, equitable assessment rests on validity, fairness, and accessibility.

Validity requires that an assessment measure the construct it claims to measure, without contamination from unnecessary linguistic demands. Fairness demands that students are neither advantaged nor disadvantaged due to their stage of English language development. Accessibility requires that assessments are designed and administered in ways that recognize language as developmental and dynamic.

Equitable MLE assessment acknowledges that academic language proficiency develops over time and varies across domains. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiency may not develop synchronously, and content mastery may exceed expressive language capacity. Therefore, student performance must always be interpreted in relation to language development data and contextualized within a broader instructional profile.

Components of MLE assessment

An equitable system encompasses multiple dimensions of assessment rather than isolating language and content as separate domains. English language proficiency assessments provide essential information about students’ developmental trajectories across modalities. However, language proficiency data alone cannot serve as a proxy for academic competence.

Content assessments must measure grade-level standards while minimizing construct-irrelevant linguistic load. This requires careful attention to vocabulary demands, syntactic complexity, and cultural references embedded in assessment tasks. Formative

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assessment plays a particularly critical role, as the formative assessment process allows educators to monitor understanding in real time and adjust instruction responsively. Diagnostic assessments, especially in high-stakes contexts such as special education evaluation, must distinguish between language acquisition processes and potential cognitive or processing differences.

Assessment for multilingual learners of English must also account for sociocultural context, including prior schooling experiences, literacy in home languages, and familiarity with dominant classroom discourse patterns. Without this broader lens, performance data risk being misinterpreted.

Why equitable assessment matters

The call for equitable assessment practices for multilingual learners of English is grounded in both research

and ethical responsibility. It prevents distortions in assessment data that can have long-term consequences. Students might be inappropriately referred to special education when language acquisition challenges are mistaken for disability. Conversely, MLEs might be excluded from gifted and advanced programs due to screening processes that rely heavily on English-dominant measures. In both cases, assessment becomes a mechanism of inequity rather than access.

Research in second language acquisition and culturally responsive pedagogy underscores that language and content are learned simultaneously. Assessment systems must reflect this integration. When thoughtfully designed, assessment can preserve high expectations while removing unnecessary linguistic barriers.

Design and implementation

Equitable assessment begins with intentional design. Linguistic responsiveness requires reducing unnecessary complexity in directions and prompts while preserving the cognitive rigor of tasks. Educators must differentiate between essential academic vocabulary tied to disciplinary understanding and peripheral language that can be simplified without altering the construct.

Providing multiple modalities for student response strengthens validity. Oral explanations, visual representations, bilingual responses, and collaborative demonstrations of understanding can reveal conceptual mastery that might otherwise remain obscured. These options do not dilute expectations; they expand access to demonstrating knowledge.

Accommodations must be applied judiciously and aligned with students' proficiency levels. Extended time, bilingual glossaries, small-group settings, and clarification of directions can mitigate linguistic barriers. However, accommodations must preserve construct validity and be guided by data rather than compliance checklists.

Asset-based framing is equally essential. Multilingualism should be recognized as a cognitive and academic resource. Translanguaging practices, when strategically incorporated, allow students to leverage their full linguistic repertoires during learning and assessment. Such practices reflect how multilingual individuals naturally process and construct meaning.

Sustained professional learning undergirds implementation. Educators require assessment literacy specific to multilingual learners of English, including the ability to interpret language proficiency data, differentiate between language development patterns and disability indicators, and design linguistically responsive tasks. Without this expertise, even well-intentioned reforms will remain superficial.

Shared responsibility

Equitable MLE assessment is not confined to English language development specialists. It requires coordinated action across roles and disciplines. General education teachers must embed linguistic scaffolds within daily assessment practices and interpret performance data with awareness of language development stages. English language development specialists provide expertise on acquisition patterns and support the co-design of responsive assessments. School psychologists and assessment professionals must ensure culturally and linguistically appropriate evaluation processes, particularly in high-stakes identification contexts.

Administrative leadership plays a pivotal role in establishing coherent policies, allocating resources, and aligning district-wide practices with equity commitments. Families, too, are integral partners, offering insight into students' linguistic backgrounds, prior experiences, and strengths. Without systemic alignment, isolated classroom efforts cannot produce durable change.

Policy, accountability, and system alignment

Assessment reform must operate within policy frameworks while advocating

for systemic improvement. Alignment between English language proficiency standards and academic content standards is essential to prevent fragmentation. Transparent reporting practices, disaggregated data analysis, and continuous improvement cycles ensure that MLE outcomes remain central to school improvement efforts.

Compliance alone is insufficient. Systems must move toward coherence, embedding linguistic responsiveness into curriculum design, instructional practice, and accountability structures.

Toward linguistically just assessment systems

Equitable assessment for multilingual learners of English requires reexamining fundamental assumptions about language, intelligence, and academic performance. When assessments privilege monolingual norms, they obscure potential and constrain opportunity. When designed with linguistic precision and interpreted with contextual awareness, they illuminate students' true capabilities.

A linguistically just assessment system maintains high academic expectations while removing construct-irrelevant barriers. It integrates language development with content mastery, promotes collaborative and data-informed decision-making, and frames multilingualism as an asset. Such systems do not compromise rigor; they clarify it. In doing so, assessment becomes a mechanism for educational opportunity rather than exclusion.

TO LEARN MORE

Empowering Educators of Newcomers: A Comprehensive Guide to Instruction and Inclusion, TESOL Press (2026)
bit.ly/4tIJgEt

Supporting Equitable Assessment for Multilingual Learners of English, Routledge (2026)
bit.ly/4dh71sA

Learning Point: Reliability and validity: How do these concepts influence accurate student assessment? MAC (2019)
bit.ly/Reliability-Validity

The Michigan Assessment Consortium is a professional association of educators who believe quality education depends on accurate, balanced, and meaningful assessment. MAC's Learning Points help increase the assessment literacy of all education stakeholders.