

English Learners to Multilinguals: Terminology We Use and Why It Matters



As many educators recognize the need to shift from deficit-based terminology to [asset-based terminology](#) for students acquiring English as an additional language, it can be helpful to revisit common terms used nationwide. Some are tied to funding streams, educational policy, or resource access, but many have remained in use because of familiarity. The *Multilingual Learner's* piece, "[A Move Toward Multilingual: Why This Term is Better Than Others \(For Now\)](#)," provides a useful basis, centralized terminology, and citations for these terms:

Universal Terms

TERM	DEFINITION	FRAMING	POLICY
Limited English Proficient (LEP)	LEP refers to students whose English is not sufficient to succeed in an English-only classroom.	This positions students' abilities around the English knowledge they lack rather than the heritage language knowledge they have. It's mostly been replaced by ELL and EL.	Federally, the Every Student Succeeds Act replaced LEP with ELL in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Despite this, some states or districts may still use LEP.
English Language Learner (ELL), English Learner (EL)	English Language Learners (ELL) are students who are in the process of learning English. While many ELLs are immigrants, the majority are born in the U.S.	This centralizes students' knowledge purely around their English language abilities rather than their overall language abilities.	Federally, ELL and EL are still most commonly used to refer to students acquiring English as an additional language.
Multilingual Learner (ML)	Multilingual Learners are students who are developing proficiency in more than one language.	This provides an expansive view of where students are in the journey to acquire proficiency in more than one language.	This is gaining traction at the state level, with some states officially adopting it. ELL and EL are still the most commonly used terms federally.
Emergent Bilingual	Emergent Bilingual learners are those in the process of learning English to become bilingual.	This acknowledges the expertise Emergent Bilingual children bring to the classroom through their heritage language.	Texas uses Emergent Bilingual officially, but federally other terms like ELL/EL are favored.

Specific Terms

TERM	DEFINITION	FRAMING	POLICY
Long-Term English Learner (LTEL)	A student who has been enrolled in U.S. schools for more than six years but continues to struggle academically due to limited English proficiency.	This sets an arbitrary time goal for students to learn English, without regard for the progress they make during that time.	This is used to classify students within a state-mandated framework.
Fluent English Proficient (FEP), Former Limited English Proficient (FLEP), Former EL, Reclassified English Proficient	A designation that means a student is no longer considered as part of a school's EL population.	This term, while acknowledging the English language skill the student has gained, still positions English as the primary indicator of language success.	This determines how a student is classified within a state's designation system.
Early Childhood English Language Learner (ECELL)	A child between ages 0 and 5 who is in the process of learning English as a second language.	This positions a child's linguistic awareness purely to their English abilities.	ELL or EL are typically used in place of ECELL at the state and federal level.
Dual Language Learner (DLL)	A child between ages 0 and 5 who is in the process of learning two or more languages.	This includes the holistic range of languages a young student is learning.	ELL and EL are typically used in place of DLL at the state and federal level.
Newcomer	Any foreign-born students or their families who have recently arrived in the U.S.	Not all Newcomers are acquiring English as an additional language, but many are.	This is tied to services available for students who have recently arrived in the U.S.
Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE), Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE)	English Learners who have experienced interrupted education due to mitigating external factors like war or migration, who have never participated in formal schooling, or have limited schooling due to resourcing in their home countries.	Referring to students as SLIFE rather than using the full term can limit understanding from educational stakeholders about these students' academic circumstances.	This is recognized at the federal and state level, but often nested under broader terms like ELL or EL.

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Learn more about the value of an asset-based perspective in the webinar "[The Next Level of Asset-Based Pedagogy: Relevant, Responsive, and Linguistic.](#)"

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