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Terminology to Describe Multilingual Learners: Labels and Their Implications

March 2023

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Suggested citation: Snyder, S., Staehr Fenner, D., Smith, S. & Singh, J. (2023, March).
Terminology to Describe Multilingual Learners: Labels and Their Implications. SupportEd.

Are you a bit confused as you try to sort out the terms used to refer to students who speak a language other than or in addition to English in the home, who may or may not be in the process of acquiring English, and who are multilingual and multicultural? Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) student, dual language learner (DLL), emergent bilingual (EB), English language learner (ELL), English learner (EL), heritage language learner (HLL), and multilingual learner (ML) are a few of the more common terms currently being used in the field of English language development (ELD) education.

Like many educators who support students learning English, we at SupportEd have been discussing the language that we use to represent different populations of students and the implications of these terms. We first shifted to using the term multilingual learner in our book [*Culturally Responsive Teaching for Multilingual Learners: Tools for Equity*](#) and have continued using ML in much of our recent work. We use this more inclusive, assets-based term to represent all students whose parents or guardians report speaking one or more language(s) other than or in addition to English in the home. In our book and in our professional development materials, we highlight that MLs may or may not qualify for ELD services due to their level of English proficiency. In 2019 more than twelve million or nearly 23 percent of children ages 5-17 in the U.S. were MLs, as reported in the United States census data. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, over five million or more than 10 percent of the school-aged population were eligible to receive specialized English language development services in the 2019-20 school year.

With our shift to using ML, we realized that we had lingering questions about the term ML and began research to help us understand how other educational professionals are using terminology to refer to students. In order to inform our understanding, we researched the use of terms across organizations and government educational offices in the United States and Canada that serve this significant and growing population of students. In this article, we will share our guiding questions, explain our research process, present our findings, and discuss what those findings may mean for the field.

Guiding Questions

Five questions framed our research. They are:

1. Which terms are used by five leading organizations and agencies in the field of ELD education and assessment?
2. Which terms are used in the 50 United States, the District of Columbia, and the 13 Canadian provinces and territories?
3. Which terms most accurately identify the cultural and linguistic assets that students bring to the classroom?
4. Which terms best promote advocacy and equity work?
5. Which terms foster shared language use among stakeholders?

Our Research Process

We first reviewed terms used by key organizations in the field, and then we examined the language used on all U.S. State, District of Columbia, and Canadian province and territory websites related to ML education. Appendices A and B detail our findings from the website extant data search. A limitation to our findings is that we based our analysis only on what we found on these websites during an initial web search conducted in August 2022 and a follow-up search conducted in January 2023; the terminology may have changed since the final search. We acknowledge that our research only encompasses a snapshot in one moment in time and does not address the myriad of terms used in individual districts within a state or the transition of terminology at the time the research took place. Due to the scope of the project, we did not follow up with any of these educational offices by phone or email to clarify the information. We recognize that if these states, provinces, or territories are in the process of changing their use of terms, the website language may not be up to date.

Our Research Findings

1. Which terms are used by five leading organizations in the field of ELD education and assessment?

We began our research by reviewing the terms used by five leading organizations and agencies in the field of ELD education and assessment in the United States. In Figure 1., we present the terms used by ELPA21, the National Association of English Learner Program Administrators (NAELPA), the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA), TESOL International Association, and WIDA. We include notes about their terminology use.

Figure 1. ELD Education and Assessment Organizations and Agencies

Organization	Term(s) Used	Notes About Terminology Use
ELPA21	English learner	English learner is used on ELPA21 website content.
National Association of English Learner Program Administrators (NAELPA)	Students and multilingual learners	NAELPA released a statement about their use of terminology in June 2022. In the document they state, “We use ‘students’ whenever possible (to avoid limiting a student’s identity to a service they receive), ‘multilingual learners’ (when referring to students who are bilingual and multilingual, regardless of whether or not they receive EL services}, and ‘multilingual/multicultural communities’ when referring to the communities and families of multilingual learners.” The NAELPA Advocating for MLs Committee also published a white paper titled The Importance of an Asset-Based Mindset and Using Asset-Based Terminology when Referencing the ESSA Subgroup – ELs (2022).

Organization	Term(s) Used	Notes About Terminology Use
U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA)	English learner and multilingual learner	While EL is still used on the OELA website , fact sheets published by this office in 2022 have included the term ML. An infographic factsheet published in August 2022 included the following footnote: "The term <i>multilingual learner(s)</i> refers to the student population defined as English learner(s) in section 8101(20) of the <i>Elementary and Secondary Education Act</i> , as amended by <i>Every Student Succeeds Act</i> . In this infographic, multilingual learner(s) is used in place of English learner(s)" (OELA, 2022).
TESOL International Association	English language learner and multilingual language learner (MLL)	The TESOL and Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) Standards for Initial TESOL Pre-K-12 Teacher Preparation Programs last revised in 2019 use the term English language learner. However, in an August 2022 TESOL Connections article , Raichle Farrelly, a member of the TESOL board of directors, explored the use of the terms EL vs. MLL. She writes "TESOL has moved toward the use of "MLL"— <i>multilingual language learner</i> —in place of ELL or EL in an effort to recognize the assets, funds of knowledge, and linguistic capital of all individuals using English as an additional language" (2022, para. 8).
WIDA	Multilingual learner	WIDA made the shift to the term ML in their 2020 English Language Development Standards Framework . In their framework, they explain, "As part of its asset-based belief system, WIDA uses the term "multilingual learners" to describe all students who come in contact with and/or interact in languages in addition to English on a regular basis. They include students who are commonly referred to as English language learners (ELLs), dual language learners (DLLs), newcomers, students with interrupted formal schooling (SIFE), long-term English learners (L-TEs), English learners with disabilities, gifted and talented English learners, heritage language learners, students with English as an additional language (EAL), and students who speak varieties of English or indigenous languages" (2020).

2. Which terms are used in the 50 United States, the District of Columbia, and the 13 Canadian provinces and territories?

We found the following in the U.S. and the District of Columbia:

- Thirty states and the District of Columbia use only EL consistently on their state education web pages.
- Eight states use a combination of EL and ELL on their state education web pages.
- Seven states use a combination of EL and ML or ELL and ML/MLL.
- Three states only use ML.
- One state uses EL and EB.

We found the following in Canada:

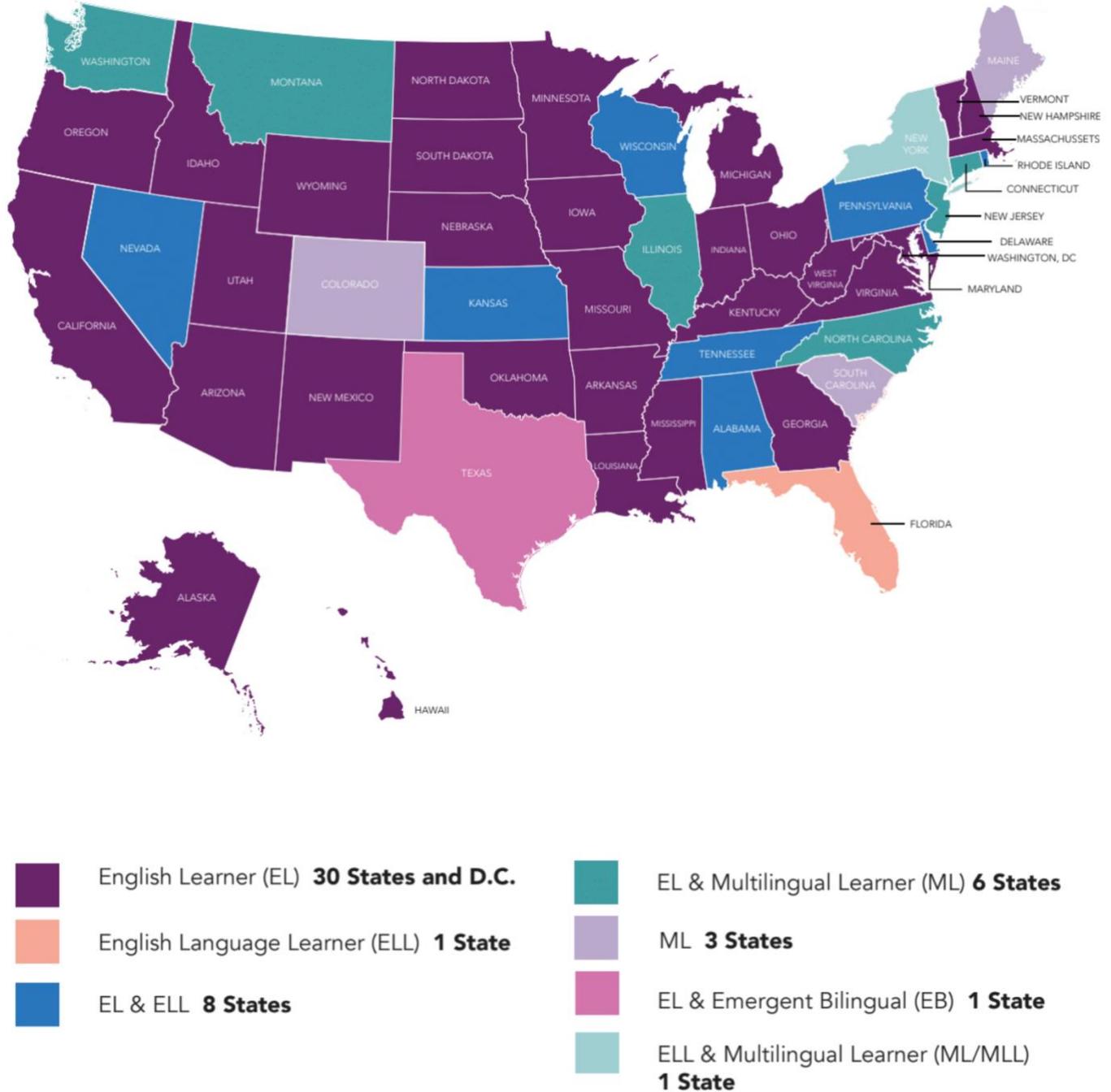
- The Canadian provinces and territories use varied terms including ELL, ESL learner, and EAL (English as an additional language) learner.
- Four provinces and two territories use ELL.¹
- Four provinces use EAL learner.
- Two provinces use ESL learner.
- One territory uses no term.²

Please see Figure 2, Terminology Used to Describe K-12 Students in the United States, and Figure 3, Terminology Used to Describe Students in Canada, for more information.

¹ Yukon follows British Columbia's curriculum. Nunavut follows Alberta's ESL curriculum.

² The Government of Northwest Territories website includes information on Our Languages (indigenous language) curriculum and French as a second language curriculum but does not mention English language development.

Figure 2. Terminology Used to Describe K-12 Students in the United States



Access a one-page printable PDF version of the U.S. map [here](#).

Figure 3. Terminology Used to Describe Students in Canada



Access a one-page printable PDF version of the Canadian map [here](#).

Discussion of Our Findings

In our conversations at SupportEd about the most accurate terms to use for such a heterogenous group of students, we have asked ourselves and our colleagues questions based on the need for language that supports an assets-based perspective of students, promotes advocacy and equity work, and facilitates shared understanding among stakeholders. Let's take a look at considerations in each of these three areas.

3. Which terms most accurately identify the cultural and linguistic assets that students bring to the classroom?

In our work with educators around culturally responsive teaching, we often highlight the importance of correctly pronouncing and using students' preferred names. Similarly, the terminology describing students deserves equal attention. Fundamental to the terminology we use is the need to utilize an assets-based approach to describe students and their families and honor their strengths.

Thankfully, the days of identifying students as "limited English proficient" are in the past. However, using the terms "English language learner" or "English learner" ignores the wealth of languages and cultures that students bring to the classroom and focuses only on them as a learner of English, seemingly at the expense of their home language(s). Terms such as culturally and linguistically diverse students, emergent bilinguals, English as an additional language learner, and multilingual learners, on the other hand, recognize the varied and rich linguistic assets that these students bring to the classroom and serve as a reminder of the importance of drawing on and leveraging these assets during instruction.

4. Which terms are more likely to promote advocacy and equity work?

During our discussions of replacing EL or ELL with ML in our work at SupportEd, we recognized that there are limitations to the term ML. The term ML is currently being used to represent students in four categories:

1. Students who were identified for and are currently receiving ELD services.
2. Students who were identified for but ELD services were refused.
3. Students who were identified for and received ELD services, but who have been reclassified after reaching a required level of English language proficiency.
4. Students whose parents or guardians report speaking one or more languages other than or in addition to English in the home and who do not qualify for ELD services.³

³ Rutherford-Quach, S., et al, (2021) in their brief [Bilingual Education Across the United States](#) define MLs as "students who are learning content while also learning the language of instruction; they are becoming – or already are – bilingual (proficient in two languages) or multilingual (proficient in two or more languages)," (p. 2). Based on this definition, students enrolled in dual language education (DLE) programs who are non-heritage language speakers (e.g., a student who grew up speaking English at home and is learning Spanish in a DLE program) would also be considered MLs.

By using ML to encompass such a broad range of students, we wonder if we may miss an opportunity to differentiate between the distinct types of support that different groups of students might need. For example, while we want to incorporate strategies to tap into all students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, only those MLs still acquiring English may need such instructional support as sentence frames or home language translations. This important distinction leads us to believe there is a need for two separate terms to represent these different groups to promote advocacy and equity.

Additionally, if we do not make the distinction between MLs who are receiving or have received ELD services from those who have not qualified for services, we are not able to track their achievement in the same way. The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) requires the long-term tracking of MLs who received ELD services (even after they have been reclassified) for four years. This tracking is necessary to demonstrate the success (or lack of success) of ELD programs. Furthermore, we should consider the long-term tracking of "ever English learners (ever-ELs)" or students who formerly received ELD services but have been reclassified and are no longer being monitored. This data on ever-ELs is critical to fostering an assets-based view of MLs and to highlight one of the many benefits of multilingualism. New York state is an example of one state that provides long-term tracking of ever-ELs, and they have found that ever-ELs in New York City Public Schools outperformed native English speakers on state English language arts assessments (Jorgensen, 2019)⁴. When our terms for ML students don't acknowledge differences in their language proficiency status, we lose the ability to measure students' language and academic growth and achievement over time. Without these distinctions, we are unable to celebrate their success or adjust programs to better meet their needs.

In light of the need for a distinction between MLs who qualify for ELD services and those who don't, we think it makes sense to use two different terms for these groups, such as ML (as an all-encompassing term) and a term such as emergent multilingual learner (EML)⁵ to represent those students still needing language development support. We are still considering what terminology may best capture students' assets as well as distinguish whether ELD services are needed.

5. Which terms support shared understanding among stakeholders?

In addition to selecting terminology that espouses an assets-based perspective of students and honors their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, we also need to use terms that are clear and easily understood by all stakeholders (e.g., students, families, educators, and policymakers). Thus, when we look at the terminology that is already being used or explore new acronyms, we recommend using terms and acronyms that:

- Underscore students' assets
- Are concise
- Do not include jargon that may be unfamiliar to stakeholders
- Do not have other meanings

⁴ Jorgensen, J. (2019). Statewide English test finds ELLs performed better than native English speakers. Spectrum News. <https://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/news/2019/10/19/statewide-english-test-finds-ells-performed-better-than-native-english-speakers>

⁵ See the comment from Tamara Hewlett on the term EML on page 10.

For example, the choices of EB and CLD students may not be clear to stakeholders outside the field of education. On the other hand, it seems the term EAL learner, used by some Canadian provinces clearly signifies its meaning.

Where Do We Go from Here?

We reached out to several colleagues in varied roles in the field of ELD education in early 2023 to ask for their input on this topic. We share their quotes below.

- “I’m thinking, perhaps the acronyms somehow reflect the program models most prominent in a particular area. Also, outside the U.S., naming English does not appear to be deficit based but could indicate some level of affluence. I really like how you name how confusing this can be, (and this confusion) takes away from the purpose of the work. Context matters, funding source, expected outcomes, populations served, etc. ...but I’m concerned less about acronyms than I am about outcomes for students. Acronyms may change, but are student outcomes improving? Have we asked students, parents, and caregivers what they think of these terms?”
— Ayanna Cooper, Ed.D., Author and Independent Consultant
- “NAELPA prefers multilingual learner because of its potential to highlight learning multiple languages rather than a lack of fluency in English that ‘English learner’ implies.”
— David Holbrook, PhD, Executive Director for NAELPA
- “When we use terms that are so vague and all-encompassing, we dilute the information that teachers have about their students. We need to do better than simply distinguishing between needing services and not needing services. We should also be distinguishing between MLs who are students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE), refugees, and gifted in order to really be able to generate good data on the quality of programs.”
— Eleni Pappamihel, PhD, Professor in the Department of Instructional Technology, Foundations, and Secondary Education, University of North Carolina Wilmington
- “While it’s helpful to have an overarching term for all students with exposure to or fluency in multiple languages, it’s also really important to remember that students who are identified as English learners with the federal definition have protections and learning needs that states, districts, and schools are legally obligated to manage. Especially in districts and states that are more hostile to immigrant communities, it is critical to have clear and legalistic language to hold policymakers to account for ensuring students learning English can access the English-only instruction they likely receive. With ML used both as an umbrella term and a specific term for students with specific legal rights, we risk losing our leverage in a context where advocates representing a wide variety of student needs are jockeying for too few resources.”
— Julie Sugarman, PhD, Senior Policy Analyst for PreK-12 Education at the Migration Policy Institute’s National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy

- “Words are so important, especially when we use those words to name groups of people. Those words end up becoming labels for the groups of people, in this case, students, and those labels end up sticking to them. Those labels also generate biases. For such a long time we have used the term ESOL to name the group of students AND the service being provided and that term had the word "other" in it — English for Speakers of Other Languages. What I've found is that that term has done exactly that, it has othered students who are adding English to their linguistic repertoire. As we made the intentional decision to drop ESOL to describe both the program and the student, we decided to name the service we provide, which is English language development (ELD) and drop ESOL. We were also challenged to adopt the term emergent bilingual because many of the students we serve speak more than two languages already before they enter our ELD programs. As a result, we have made the intentional decision to refer to our students as emergent multilingual learners (EMLs) and we use this term to identify the students receiving ELD services vs. multilingual learners who could be many of the over 160,000 students who speak more than two languages in our district. We cannot wait, though, for the federal government to change language from English Learner to a more asset-based language as history shows us that there is often a delay. And it's always the right time to do the right thing!”
— Tamara Hewlett, Supervisor, ELD PreK-12, Department of English Learners and Multilingual Education, Montgomery County Public Schools, MD
- “It has been a few years now since WIDA decided to emphasize the term ‘multilingual learner’ over ‘English language learner’ or ‘English learner.’ We still use the latter term when specifically referring to students who qualify for support services as this is still the term used by US ED. However, we feel the broader, more assets-based term ‘multilingual learner’ puts the emphasis where it should be on students’ more holistic selves. While learning English is extremely important, it should not define these students completely. Their native languages, cultures, and varied experiences are part of who they are and crucially important as we look at meeting their needs and empowering them to succeed in our schools.”
— Tim Boals, PhD, WIDA Founder and Director

Final Thoughts

While we don’t have an easy solution to offer, we are looking forward to continuing conversations around this complex area of terminology. We wholeheartedly support assets-based terminology for all students. At the same time, we also see the pressing need for educators to be aware of how to leverage the strengths and meet the learning needs of specific groups of students who might all fall under the umbrella term ML. This question is a challenging and important one for the field of English language development, and we would love to have your input on this topic. What do you think about the language used to describe this widely diverse, assets-rich, multicultural, and multilingual group of students? What term do you suggest?

Please share your thoughts via Twitter using the hashtag **#MLTerminology** and tag us at **@SupportEduc**.

Appendix A: Terms used in the United States

State/District	Emergent Bilingual	English Language Learner	English Learner	Multilingual Learner
Alabama		x	X	
Alaska			X	
Arizona			X	
Arkansas			X	
California			X	
Colorado				x
Connecticut			X	x
Delaware		x	X	
District of Columbia			X	
Florida		x		
Georgia			X	
Hawaii			X	
Idaho			X	
Illinois			X	x
Indiana			X	
Iowa			X	
Kansas		x	X	

State/District	Emergent Bilingual	English Language Learner	English Learner	Multilingual Learner
Kentucky			X	
Louisiana			X	
Maine				X
Maryland			X	
Massachusetts			X	
Michigan			X	
Minnesota			X	
Mississippi			X	
Missouri			X	
Montana			X	X
Nebraska			X	
Nevada		X	X	
New Hampshire			X	
New Jersey			X	X
New Mexico			X	
New York*		X		X
North Carolina			X	X
North Dakota			X	
Ohio			X	
Oklahoma			X	
Oregon			X	

State/District	Emergent Bilingual	English Language Learner	English Learner	Multilingual Learner
Pennsylvania		x	x	
Rhode Island*		x	x	x
South Carolina				x
South Dakota			x	
Tennessee		x	x	
Texas	x		x	
Utah			x	
Vermont			x	
Virginia			x	
Washington			x	x
West Virginia			x	
Wisconsin		x	x	
Wyoming			x	

* Most states used the acronym ML for multilingual learners while RI and NY used the acronym MLL.

Appendix B: Terms used in Canadian Provinces/Territories

Province/Territory	English as a Second Language Student	English as an Additional Language Learner	English Language Learner	No Term
Alberta			x	
British Columbia			x	
Manitoba		x		
New Brunswick			x	
Newfoundland and Labrador	x			
Northwest Territories**				x
Nova Scotia		x		
Nunavut**			x	
Ontario			x	
Prince Edward Island		x		
Quebec	x			
Saskatchewan		x		
Yukon**			x	

**Canadian territories