

UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH LEARNERS

LEARNING SUPPORT ACTIVITIES • TEACHER RESOURCE

English Learners (ELs), sometimes referred to as Multilingual Learners (MLs), are students who are developing proficiency in English while learning academic content. These students bring valuable linguistic and cultural experiences to the classroom. Learning English is not a disability, and English Learners can successfully acquire American Sign Language when provided with appropriate supports and opportunities.

Who Are English Learners?

English Learners speak or are exposed to a language other than English at home and are developing English language skills. Their levels of English proficiency vary widely, and each student has unique strengths, educational experiences, and learning needs.

What You May Notice in an ASL Classroom

- Difficulty understanding English directions or written materials
- Strong communication skills in their home language
- Needing additional time to process English vocabulary
- Using gestures, visuals, or peers to support communication
- Steady progress as English and ASL skills develop together

Student Strengths

- Multilingual and multicultural perspectives
- Strong visual learning abilities
- Adaptability and perseverance
- Rich cultural experiences
- Ability to make connections across languages

How Teachers Can Help

- Use visual supports and demonstrations.
- Model signs consistently and clearly.
- Pair spoken or written English with ASL whenever possible.
- Teach vocabulary explicitly.
- Encourage participation in a supportive classroom environment.

Things to Avoid

- Assuming limited English proficiency reflects limited ability.
- Speaking louder instead of making language more accessible.
- Expecting immediate mastery of English or ASL.
- Comparing English Learners to native English speakers.

★ Remember

Being an English Learner is not a disability. Students may be learning English and ASL simultaneously, which is a remarkable accomplishment. High expectations, visual instruction, patience, and meaningful support help English Learners succeed in the ASL classroom.