Introduction: Understanding the Struggles of Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education and Other Multilingual Learners

As teachers of students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) and struggling multilingual learners (MLs), we are very familiar with the obstacles educators encounter when trying to meet the needs of their students. Our students are your students, too. They include teenagers mismatched with elementary-style curricular resources, high school–aged newcomers deemed not making progress despite significant gains, and exhausted wage earners falling asleep in class after working a night shift. This book is designed to equip teachers with practical solutions catering to the needs of these very students. We outline strategies that we have found effective as well as an instructional model that addresses the needs of SLIFE and other struggling MLs. Each strategy is accompanied by sample instructional materials and templates meant to be used or to serve as inspiration for creating your own. Our book sets out to answer the most pressing question that teachers ask themselves: What strategies can I use in my daily instruction to meet the needs of my students?

With an increasing number of MLs in our schools, it has become apparent that many of them struggle to meet grade-level expectations.

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This is especially true for newcomers and SLIFE. Newcomers are broadly defined by the U.S. Department of Education as "K–12 students born outside the United States who have arrived in the country in the last three years and are still learning English" (2023, p. 4). Factors such as home language literacy, degree of prior schooling, and migration history can all serve as obstacles to meeting educational demands (Institute of Education Sciences, 2018). Due to language barriers and work schedules, family and caregiver engagement can also be a struggle.

A subset of the ML population, SLIFE are students with limited literacy skills in their native language and who are below grade level in most academic skills (Freeman & Freeman, 2002). Although statistics on the current number of SLIFE in U.S. schools are not available, Fleischman and Hopstock (1993) estimated that 20 percent of high school MLs and 12 percent of middle school MLs had missed two or more years of schooling (as cited in Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2000). In a more recent study, Potochnick (2018) found that 11.4 percent of foreign-born 10th graders had arrived in the United States with interrupted schooling.

As SLIFE and other struggling MLs enroll in U.S. schools, they confront a plethora of challenges that interfere—in some cases quite significantly—with their ability to acquire language and content and meet grade-level expectations. As DeCapua and colleagues (2007) note, many SLIFE have faced issues such as "war, migration, lack of education facilities, cultural dictates, and economic circumstances" (p. 40). Montero and colleagues (2014) underscore that in many cases, SLIFE have experienced years "without access to the foundations of formal education—literacy and numeracy" (p. 59). According to Wright (2015), many SLIFE have encountered discrimination and were systematically denied access to education in their native countries.

Because of their limited or interrupted schooling experiences, SLIFE often possess minimal or even nonexistent literacy skills in their native language (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020; DeCapua & Marshall, 2015; DeCapua et al., 2007; Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Montero et al., 2014;

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Windle & Miller, 2012). Consequently, these students lack sufficient or accurate background knowledge related to academic concepts, possess limited academic vocabulary in their native language, and have inadequate exposure to various literary genres (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015; Montero et al., 2014; Windle & Miller, 2012). This reality puts SLIFE at a significant disadvantage since, upon enrolling in U.S. schools, they face the additional challenges of learning English, becoming proficient in a prescribed set of knowledge and skills, and preparing for high-stakes assessments (DeCapua et al., 2009).

We see these issues brought to life every day by the students in our classrooms. For example, consider Luis, a 17-year-old SLIFE enrolled in 9th grade. Luis always arrives to class on time and is eager to copy down the opening activity, often meticulously using colored pens and pencils to re-create any colored or bolded fonts. But when it comes to completing a prompt with a response of his own, he stops. Though Luis can easily list everything he sees in the pictures accompanying our text, he is unable to make inferences from the list.

Like Luis, Yakaury, a 16-year-old who recently immigrated to the United States, has a hard time making inferences even when provided with scaffolds such as pictures, sentence stems, or native-language supports. She can easily provide answers to factual questions that require her to look for keywords in the text and copy text parts to support her answers, but she has difficulty dealing with higher-order questions whose answers cannot be readily gleaned from the text.

And then there's Amauris. Though he has spent two years in our program, he's unfortunately made little academic progress. His literacy skills in both English and his home language are even less developed than those of his classmates. Unlike most of his peers, who work diligently on the tasks assigned, he would rather act up in class than reveal his academic struggles. The only time he is willing to participate is after hearing his peers' answers, which he is able to memorize.

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Obstacles Faced by SLIFE and Other Struggling MLs

In addition to the obstacles that the research and student experiences reveal, SLIFE often confront "cultural dissonance," which is defined as a "mismatch between home and school" (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011a, p. 25). This mismatch occurs as SLIFE encounter different cultural values and become acquainted with a different learning paradigm in U.S. schools. This learning paradigm is predicated on the future relevance of the taught curriculum, student independence, individual accountability, dependence on the written word, and analytical academic tasks, such as classifying, comparing and contrasting, and synthesizing. On the other hand, many SLIFE come from environments that emphasize the immediate relevance of knowledge, interconnectedness, shared responsibility, oral transmission of information, and pragmatic tasks focused on real-world applications (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011a). The cultural dissonance that SLIFE experience can therefore have detrimental effects on their academic performance, resulting in low academic achievement and high dropout rates.

Immigration status can also influence a student's academic success. Undocumented students, many of whom are SLIFE, experience significant difficulties, such as completing graduation requirements, resisting pressure to drop out in favor of paid work, and pursuing seemingly unattainable higher education prospects. According to Zong and Batalova (2019), only about 98,000 undocumented students graduate from U.S. high schools annually. However, a staggering 40 percent of undocumented adolescents drop out of high school, compared to only 8 percent of their U.S.-born peers (Perez, 2014, as cited in Manspile et al., 2021). Perez (2014) identifies financial burdens, the fear of revealing one's legal status, and a lack of support toward attaining postsecondary education as three major contributors.

Many SLIFE, particularly those who are refugees, are also afflicted by stress related to trauma, acculturation, isolation, and resettlement

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(Boston Children's Hospital, 2019). These students often have trouble fitting in at school and forming a new multicultural identity.

Age, too, can play a significant role in the language and content acquisition process for all MLs. In the case of SLIFE at the secondary level, age is an important factor in determining placement. This can result in such suboptimal scenarios as a 16-year-old with a 3rd-grade skill level being enrolled in 9th grade. The discrepancy between a student's age and their actual skill level can certainly leave educators feeling perplexed since many of the resources that their students actually need, based on their skill level, are significantly below the grade-appropriate resources that they are expected to implement.

MLs with Disabilities

MLs with disabilities are a growing and underserved subpopulation of MLs (Fagan & Herrera, 2022). These are students who are eligible for both special education services and multilingual learner services. According to Fagan and Herrera (2022), "English learners with disabilities accounted for 9.5 percent of all students with individualized education programs (IEPs) in 2013–14 and 11.28 percent in 2019–20 (about 830,000 students)" (p. 2). A full 93 percent of these students receive IEPs for a specific learning disability, speech/language impairment, or intellectual disability; the rest receive special education services for low-incidence disabilities such as hearing or visual impairment or traumatic brain injury (Fagan & Herrera, 2022).

Although disability categories can vary from state to state, federal law ensures that MLs must be evaluated in both English and their native language in order to ensure the disability is separate from challenges stemming from the language acquisition process. Nevertheless, concerns over the accuracy of the identification process continue. MLs receiving special education services, and those in need of such services, have unique academic and social-emotional needs that require educators with specific training and expertise. Watkins and Liu (2013) note that serving this

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population of students requires specialized staff recruitment and training as well as materials and assessments in the home languages of the MLs and their families.

Long-Term English Learners

Another group of struggling MLs includes long-term English learners (LTELs). According to Freeman and Freeman (2002), SLIFE and LTELs are the two groups of MLs that "experience the most difficulty in school" (p. 5). LTELs are often found in grades 6–12 and are defined as having spent seven or more years in the United States. They typically have adequate grades but score poorly on standardized tests and are at risk of dropping out. They have limited literacy in both their home language and English and have experienced inconsistent English language development (ELD) instruction (Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Menken & Kleyn, 2009; Olsen & Jaramillo, 1999). A strength of LTELs is their tendency to have strong oral skills in both English and their native language; however, they struggle when it comes to academic literacy skills (Cashiola & Potter, 2020; Olsen, 2014).

The Unique Strengths of MLs

Despite the very real challenges faced by SLIFE and other struggling MLs, we know that these students also bring many strengths to our classrooms and communities. Many of them are newcomers who bring rich experiences, customs, and backgrounds that can help them adapt and thrive in a new community (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2022a). González and colleagues (2005) refer to these strengths as funds of knowledge, which include their home language, cultural knowledge, artifacts, and resources. Their global perspective, extensive pragmatic knowledge and skills, and rich cultural backgrounds are strengths that our SLIFE possess and that can be drawn upon for achieving academic success (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2022b). Therefore, effective, equitable instruction of

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these students must incorporate culturally responsive instruction that supports academic achievement, literacy, and social-emotional learning (SEL).

Research, however, does not seem to do justice to the strengths that our MLs show us on a daily basis. The MLs with whom we've worked have shown us what it means to create an unparalleled sense of community in a classroom. For example, after just three weeks in class, Allen asked us if he could bring in a cake to celebrate his birthday with his classmates. It was only after we had enjoyed the delicious cake and were cleaning up that Allen told us this was his first time having classmates and going to school.

More often than not, MLs are quick to form connections and help their peers with tasks, even when there are risks involved. For example, despite having been told not to talk or collaborate during a quiz, our student Manuel proceeded to help a friend who had recently enrolled in the class. When we brought this up with him, his response was "But Miss, he doesn't understand"—showing that he placed his desire to help his new friend above the risk of failing his quiz. Manuel's empathetic response was a testament to the struggles he had experienced firsthand as an ML himself.

Two other students, Kiara and Julio, started in our self-contained SLIFE classes, but their unwavering determination helped them quickly move through the levels and, ultimately, enroll in college. These two students had every reason not to complete their homework each night—they went directly from school to their jobs, one at a factory and the other at a restaurant, until the early-morning hours. Despite facing far greater pressures and responsibilities than most teenagers their age, they never gave up on their academic goals. Kiara was even able to participate in the school's newly formed early college program, which enabled her to take courses at a local community college while still enrolled in high school. And showing that there is absolutely no limit to what a SLIFE can do, Julio was one of our co-presenters at an education conference.

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Obstacles Faced by Educators of SLIFE and Other Struggling MLs

Challenges, however, are not unique to SLIFE and other struggling MLs. Educators of these students encounter their own set of obstacles—obstacles that include a lack of effective strategies and scaffolds, a shortage of adequate curricular resources, and, very importantly, a focus on standardized testing.

Research shows that the strategies teachers use in the classroom have a significant impact on student literacy skills (Cohan & Honigsfeld, 2017; Li & Zhang, 2004; Menken, 2013; Montero et al., 2014; Windle & Miller, 2012). Unfortunately, Li and Zhang (2004) found that many teachers working with SLIFE are not aware of strategies that can help them meet their students' needs. In the case of teachers working with SLIFE at the secondary level, Windle and Miller (2012) noted the unpopularity of text-based supports for scaffolding and hypothesized that this may be due to the scarcity of appropriate resources and the time constraints that prevent them from creating such resources from scratch.

Time constraints affect all educators of SLIFE and struggling MLs. As teachers try to navigate the challenges of aligning instruction to grade-level standards, they find themselves confined to implementing resources that are often well above their students' skill levels. However, the alternative of providing resources aligned to students' skill levels is equally problematic as these resources are designed for much younger learners and do not offer the level of complexity, rigor, and age-appropriate context that students will encounter in mainstream classes, let alone on standardized assessments. Some educators choose to create their own resources—but how does one even begin to create an ELA text for a 20-year-old who only completed 2nd grade in his native country? Doing this takes time—a *lot* of time. To further complicate matters, teachers are pressured to follow a prescribed scope and sequence that does not leave much room for the extra time and support that SLIFE need.

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As the emphasis on standardized testing increases in U.S. schools, so does the pressure that educators and students alike face. Citing Creagh (2019) and Giouroukakis and Honigsfeld (2010), Filimon (2023) shows that SLIFE are not exempt from standardized testing requirements and are expected to participate in grade-level content-area tests, similar to their mainstream peers. Consequently, educators feel compelled to emphasize preparing students to meet the demands of such high-stakes assessments, as Creagh (2019) notes. Such emphasis, DeCapua and Marshall (2011a, 2015) underscore, forces teachers to devote extensive time to test preparation activities, preventing them from appropriately addressing the needs of their learners.

In the face of so many seemingly insurmountable challenges, it comes as no surprise that educators of SLIFE and other struggling MLs often feel defeated before they even begin to figure out how to address the needs of their students. As educators, we totally get it. We want the best for our students but don't always know what "the best" looks like in the classroom on a daily basis. The following chapters provide you with practical strategies you can use with your students. It is our hope that this book will empower all educators of SLIFE and struggling MLs to swap that mismatched elementary-style curricular resource for your teenaged SLIFE with an age-appropriate, relevant adapted text and scaffolds designed to address their literacy needs. We hope you will engage your secondary-level SLIFE with standards-based, rigorous instruction that can help prepare them to meet graduation requirements. It's our wish that you will be empowered to involve your exhausted wage earner in interactive, student-centered learning activities that integrate all four language domains.

How This Book Is Organized

As you explore this book, you will see that we have organized our strategies and instructional resources by language domain.

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In Chapter 1, you will learn about practical resources and templates for engaging SLIFE and struggling MLs in academic conversation, thus targeting the speaking and listening domains. Many SLIFE and struggling MLs have strong oral language skills in their native language (Alvarez, 2020; Barba et al., 2019; DeCapua, 2016; DeCapua & Marshall, 2011a, 2015; Digby, 2019; Hos et al., 2019; Kennedy & Lamina, 2016). Chapter 1 focuses on ways to develop this strength to help students learn academic English.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to equipping educators with strategies for developing the reading skills of SLIFE and other struggling MLs. This chapter focuses on proven reading comprehension strategies specifically designed to help SLIFE and other struggling MLs interact with texts in all phases of the reading process.

The focus of Chapter 3 is on enabling students to achieve success in academic writing. This chapter provides an overview of our highly successful, research-based writing protocol adapted specifically for SLIFE and other struggling MLs. Using colors to represent the key elements of a written response, this protocol allows students to identify the patterns in academic writing.

In Chapter 4, we discuss our spiraling approach to instruction, designed to meet the needs of SLIFE and other struggling MLs at the forefront. Now equipped with a toolbox of strategies presented in Chapters 1 through 3, readers learn how to maximize their effectiveness by rethinking traditional approaches to instruction. Based on Bruner's (1960) concept of spiral curriculum, our model focuses on revisiting key language skills multiple times throughout the year—a significant departure from traditional instructional approaches, which progress in a linear manner from basic to more complex skills. We have found the spiraling model to be highly effective with SLIFE and other struggling MLs. All students have opportunities to either learn or go deeper, thus simultaneously advancing their English learning and content knowledge.

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The final chapter provides a complete unit aligned to the Common Core State Standards and is broken down into daily lessons that put into practice the strategies outlined in the preceding chapters. This unit is inspired by the Understanding by Design framework (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) and the principles of project-based learning (PBL). Each lesson includes a language and content objective, SEL connections, an agenda of activities and assessments, and reproducible resources. The unit focuses on an engaging and relevant topic—the impacts of technology—and culminates in a class debate.

Five Guiding Principles

You will find five guiding principles throughout this book that are drawn from our own experience and that we believe will enhance your instruction and foster learning:

1. **Take a spiraling approach.** MLs (and learners in general) need concepts to be revisited and reinforced. Instead of following a linear approach that builds on increasingly complex language, concepts, and skills, take time to revisit concepts systematically and explicitly. You will find that this approach enables you to reach more students. New students will have an opportunity to learn concepts at any point in the school year, struggling students will have a second (and third and fourth) chance to learn, and advanced students will be able to deepen their understanding. We encourage you to spiral all language skills, including those related to grammar and pronunciation.
2. **Make time to talk.** It is important to make time for peer-to-peer interactions among students. Many of the strategies in this book focus on ways to increase student talk time. As the saying goes, the person speaking most is learning most—and that is especially true for SLIFE and struggling MLs.

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3. **Be consistent.** You will see that many of the same sentence stems are used across various activities and scaffolds in this book. Keeping the sentence stems consistent ensures that struggling MLs internalize them and can use them effectively once the scaffolds are removed. Consistency also reduces the cognitive load associated with learning new information and builds confidence in students.
4. **Remember that there is no *L* without *SEL*.** Many of the strategies in this book are designed to connect MLs with one another so they can reflect on their lives, their communities, and society at large while collaborating to meet academic goals. We strongly believe that integrating SEL into instruction isn't just another box to check; rather, social-emotional learning *is* the box. In learning past-tense verbs, students develop the SEL competency of communication; when they give a presentation, they build their self-confidence; as they research a problem and brainstorm solutions, they are problem solving, analyzing situations, and evaluating. We encourage you to display and go over the SEL competencies that you are addressing every day along with your language and content objectives.

   Students, especially MLs, learn best when their learning is connected to their social and emotional needs. Establishing a safe learning environment is paramount to the second-language acquisition process. Some academic topics can seem abstract to many SLIFE, so connecting them explicitly to students' lives can increase motivation and make learning more meaningful and engaging.
5. **Raise the bar.** Remember that you are dealing with uncommon learners who have a history of overcoming challenges. Allow yourself to take instructional risks and you will see your students soar to new academic heights. Keep your expectations high and help students meet them by designing appropriate scaffolds rather than lowering the bar by watering down the curriculum. As we know from experience, when teachers and students take risks, learning is *unlimited*.

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We are thrilled to share this book with you in hopes that you will be able to implement the strategies in your own classroom with your own students, as we have. If you do, we'd love to hear your experiences and feedback. Above all, we hope that the contents of this book enable you to foster the unlimited potential of your students.

Now It's Your Turn: Questions and Exercises

- Describe your students. Do their struggles mirror any of the struggles discussed in this chapter?
- Reflect on your students' strengths. What assets do they bring to the classroom? Do their strengths mirror any of the strengths discussed in this chapter?
- What strategies are you currently implementing in your teaching? What have you found to be most successful with your SLIFE and/or struggling MLs?

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