education policy analysis archives

A peer-reviewed, independent, open access, multilingual journal

epaa aape

Arizona State University

Volume 33 Number 18 March 4, 2025 ISSN 1068-2341

Critical Discourse Analysis of the Terminology and Definitions of Multilingual Learners Across U.S. Policies vs. the WIDA ELD Standards

Dai Gu
George Mason University
United States
&
Sujin Kim
George Mason University
United States

Citation: Gu, D., & Kim, S (2025). Critical discourse analysis of the terminology and definitions of multilingual learners across U.S. policies vs. the WIDA ELD standards. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 33*(18). https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.33.7970

Abstract: This paper explores how "English learners (ELs)" or who we prefer to call "multilingual learners" are labeled and positioned in policy documents and leading education research documents respectively. Attending to the urgent call for serving the growing number of linguistically and culturally diverse learners, this study delves into the definitions and implications of the basic terminology referring to these learners. Specifically, a 50-state terminology and definitions for multilingual learners as well as the WIDA ELD Standards are examined using critical discourse analysis. The findings reveal contrastive positioning of multilingual learners in policies and research. Deficit-based terms, widely used in policies, are reflective of the monolingual English-only ideology in U.S. schools, which is inconsistent with research and obstructs multilingual learners' access to equitable education.
Keywords: critical discourse analysis; multilingual learners; terminology; WIDA; U.S. policies

Journal website: http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/
Facebook: /EPAAA
Twitter: @epaa_aape

Manuscript received: 28/6/2024
Revisions received: 9/2/2024
Accepted: 21/2/2025

Análisis crítico del discurso sobre la terminología y las definiciones de los estudiantes multilingües en las políticas de EE.UU. frente a los estándares de desarrollo del idioma inglés de WIDA
Resumen: Este artículo explora cómo los "aprendices de inglés (ELs)" o, como preferimos llamarlos, "aprendices multilingües" son etiquetados y posicionados en documentos de políticas y en los principales documentos de investigación educativa, respectivamente. En respuesta a la urgente necesidad de atender al creciente número de aprendices lingüística y culturalmente diversos, este estudio profundiza en las definiciones e implicaciones de la terminología básica que hace referencia a estos aprendices. Específicamente, se examinan las definiciones y la terminología de los aprendices multilingües en los 50 estados, así como los Estándares de ELD de WIDA, utilizando análisis crítico del discurso. Los hallazgos revelan un posicionamiento contrastante de los aprendices multilingües en las políticas y la investigación. Los términos basados en déficit, ampliamente utilizados en las políticas, reflejan la ideología monolingüe exclusiva en inglés en las escuelas de EE. UU., lo cual es inconsistente con la investigación y obstruye el acceso de los aprendices multilingües a una educación equitativa.
Palabras-clave: análisis crítico del discurso; aprendices multilingües; terminología; WIDA; políticas de EE.UU.

Análise crítica do discurso sobre a terminologia e as definições dos alunos multilíngues nas políticas dos EUA versus os padrões de desenvolvimento da língua inglesa da WIDA
Resumo: Este artigo explora como os "aprendizes de inglês (ELs)" ou, como preferimos chamar, "aprendizes multilíngues" são rotulados e posicionados em documentos de políticas e nos principais documentos de pesquisa educacional, respectivamente. Atendendo ao urgente chamado para atender o número crescente de aprendizes linguisticamente e culturalmente diversos, este estudo investiga as definições e implicações da terminologia básica referente a esses aprendizes. Especificamente, são examinadas as definições e a terminologia para aprendizes multilíngues em 50 estados, bem como os Padrões ELD da WIDA, utilizando análise crítica do discurso. Os achados revelam um posicionamento contrastante dos aprendizes multilíngues nas políticas e na pesquisa. Termos baseados em déficits, amplamente utilizados nas políticas, refletem a ideologia monolíngue exclusiva em inglês nas escolas dos EUA, o que é inconsistente com a pesquisa e obstrui o acesso dos aprendizes multilíngues a uma educação equitativa.
Palavras-chave: análise crítica do discurso; aprendizes multilíngues; terminologia; WIDA; políticas dos EUA

Critical Discourse Analysis of the Terminology and Definitions of Multilingual Learners Across U.S. Policies vs. the WIDA ELD Standards

The percentage of students in U.S. public schools who speak a home language other than English reached 10.6 % by Fall of 2021, and this number keeps growing (NCES, 2023). These students have been labeled with different terms, including English learners (ELs), English language learners (ELLs), Language other than English (LOTE) speakers, limited English proficient students (LEPs), English proficient (EP) students, English as a second language (ESL) students, and English as an additional language (EAL) students. More recent terms include culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, emergent bilinguals (EB), and multilingual learners (MLs). It is important to

note the differences in the names given to these students, because as García (2009b) writes, "The names we use mean something" (p. 325). The different labels represent specific ideologies and inevitably influence students' identities and in turn their educational outcomes (García, 2009b). Many of these labels (e.g. ELs, ELLs, LOTE, LEPs, EP, ESL, EAL) put English at the center by solely foregrounding the student's English proficiency levels, particularly the lack of it, while the value or the proficiency of students' first languages are disregarded (Potowski, 2010). Aligned with the dominant language ideology, these terms reflect an English-only monolingual focus, while language diversity is implied as a problem to be fixed (Ruíz, 1984). Consequently, the quality of education for linguistically diverse students in the United States may be compromised when compared to that of their English-dominant peers, as schools are failing to capitalize on and maximize these students' full learning potential. This in turn will limit their access to academic and career opportunities. In comparison, alternative labels such as "CLD," "EB," and "ML" embrace an asset-oriented perspective by explicitly recognizing students' linguistic repertories and cultural wealth as resources for learning. These terms endorse instructional approaches that encourage educators to build upon students' full linguistic and cultural knowledge in the classroom (Kanno et al., 2024). In this paper, we deliberately use "multilingual learners" when referring to this student population in our analysis of the varying terms discussed above. We made this conscious choice for several reasons. First, this term foregrounds students' capabilities rather than perceived deficits in English proficiency. Second, it would be wise to follow George Orwell's sage warnings from the classic *1984* (1949) regarding how abbreviated forms can strip away important conceptual meanings. Therefore, we avoid using acronyms throughout the paper to preserve the full significance of acknowledging these students' multilingual capabilities.

Given the varied implications that different labels can have on the educational experiences and equity of multilingual learners, it is critical to examine the ideological underpinnings of the labels used to describe this student population within the U.S. education system and society at large. While we acknowledge that shifts in terminology alone cannot address deeper systemic inequities, we argue that examining different and evolving labels provides critical insight into the ideologies that shape education frames for multilingual learners. Particularly, understanding how these students are labeled, defined, and positioned in major policy documents and guiding frameworks of their education is crucial, as these documents directly influence teachers' daily practices with this student group.

This study draws on critical discourse analysis as its theoretical foundation and methods of analysis (Fairclough, 2010; Gee, 2014; Rogers, 2011; Wodak & Meyer, 2009) to examine the underlying assumptions inherent in the terms and definitions found in current policies and research documents. The analysis seeks to uncover the ramifications of these linguistic choices for the political and educational/research spheres respectively. Two sources of texts were chosen for critical analysis due to their status as the guiding principles in the education of multilingual learners in the United States: 1) the terms and definitions of multilingual learners used in the policy documents of the 50 states as of 2020; 2) the 2020 edition of the WIDA (World-class Instructional Design and Assessment) English Language Development Standard Framework by WIDA Consortium, comprised of 41 U.S. states. From our work with multilingual learners and their educators, we noticed that teachers' instructional and assessment practices are frequently limited by directives imposed through top-down policies. Even when teachers are aware of more effective practices to meet the needs of multilingual learners, policy restrictions often prevent them from implementing these approaches. In addition to policy constraints, we recognize that the education of multilingual learners is also guided by influential frameworks such as the WIDA standards, which were developed by leading scholars and have been adopted across 41 states. Therefore, we are motivated

to investigate how multilingual learners are positioned in two distinct but influential contexts: state-level policy documents that provide regulatory framework, and the WIDA standards that serve as research-based guiding principles that inform instructional practices for multilingual learners. Ultimately this study aims to understand how the respective labels and definitions by policymakers and researchers may facilitate or adversely impact the students' equitable access to education, elucidating the complex nature of labelling multilingual learners in the U.S. school context.

This study mainly focused on the following research questions: (1) How are multilingual learners labeled and positioned respectively in the policy documents of different U.S. states and the guiding principles of the inter-state WIDA Consortium of researchers and educators? (2) What linguistic ideologies do policymakers and researchers/educators hold, respectively, as reflected in the two contexts? (3) What implications do the findings have on the educational equity for the education of multilingual learners in the United States?

Related Literature and Frameworks

Labeling and Implications

As the number of multilingual learners increases around the world including the United States, addressing the diverse needs of this student group has become a critical education agenda. For decades, they were labeled as English learners (ELs) who needed to fit into the mainstream language and culture at the expense of their home language and cultural identity. Not only policymakers and schools but also parents and students themselves assumed that this was the best and only way for multilingual students to access adequate education. In recent years, however, scholars have critiqued the English-only ideology embedded within labels, raising questions about the practice of labeling multilingual learners, resulting in discussions on the consequences of deficit-oriented labeling and alternative labels.

García (2009b) argued that bilingualism should be centralized as a cognitive and social resource in the schooling of multilingual learners in the United States, arguing that educators and policymakers perpetuate educational inequity by disregarding the potential and necessity for bilingualism. García proposed to use "emergent bilinguals" (EB) as a more appropriate term that would benefit everyone including students, educators, policymakers, parents, and society. For children, the new term acknowledges the value of their home languages, challenging the "false categorization of children as either limited English proficient (LEP) or English proficient (EP)" (p. 322) and recognizing bilingualism on a continuum and viewing students as having different levels of accessibility to "languaging bilingually" (p. 323). For teachers, EB suggests a more heteroglossic approach to instruction by leveraging students' home language capacity and resources for classroom instruction and learning. This enables teachers to hold higher expectations for their students instead of only focusing on "fixing" their English problem through remedial frameworks. For policymakers, the ideology behind "emergent bilinguals" promotes asset-based policy decisions and implementation, leveraging rather than dismissing students' strengths. For parents, they will be able to participate in their children's education as partners and experts in their language and culture, rather than merely as passive recipients of the U.S. education services. For society at large, bilingualism is a critical index of the society's capacity to accommodate diverse community members as the proper term helps its members recognize and utilize the abundant linguistic and cultural resources in the country.

Previously, Webster and Lu (2012) conducted a systematic literature review of the terms in major research databases and found shifting preferences for different terms over time. Contemporary scholars advocate for the use of strength-based terms to refer to the same student

group like culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) rather than using deficit-oriented terms like limited English proficient (LEP), which carries negative connotations. While the term, English language learner (ELL), is found to be the most commonly used term, Webster and Lu (2012) proposed an alternative term "Learner of English as an additional language (LEAL)," as it is more "politically and culturally appropriate and respectful" and "utilizes students' first language while also acknowledging existing language competencies" (p. 83).

Martínez (2018) called people to imagine "beyond the English Learner label" and criticized the persistence of deficit discourses. He argued that "*English learner* is a label that conceals more than it reveals" (p. 515, emphasis in original). This category has been limiting our thinking about multilingual learners. Instead of exploring ways to build on what they already know and possess, we are directed to focus on what they lack and are least capable of, assuming they are only struggling or at risk. Therefore, "we end up normalizing monolingualism, viewing these students as monolithic" (p. 515). Similarly, Cunningham (2019) questioned the commonly used "ideologically entrenched terms" and urged people to reconceptualize the many terms in use (p. 121). Reflecting on the existing terms used in the UK school contexts, she recommended steering away from deficit thinking and diminishing the dominance of English, proposing the term "speakers of Languages *Beyond* English (LBE)" (p. 125, emphasis in original).

Scholars have argued that inappropriate labeling can negatively affect multilingual learners' identity construction. Oral (2015) emphasized the importance of addressing students' challenges posed by native-speakerism. Recent research has acknowledged the complex nature of language learners' social identity as it can be understood only within the context of the "larger and frequently inequitable social structures" (p. 94). Instead of imposing the English-dominant speakers' perspectives to understand these students' identities, it is essential to empower them to be their own agents in constructing and representing their identities, even as they navigate the process of acquiring a second language. Khan (2020) also discussed identity negotiation of students labeled as ESL, criticizing the label as it implies that "there is an othering process going on" (p. 361). In practice, multilingual students need to navigate learning environments where dominant discourse prevails within ongoing power dynamics that work against them.

As discussed above, the issue of inappropriate labeling of multilingual learners needs to be investigated through a critical lens, as language use is always situated in certain social order and ideologies, reflecting and perpetuating the existing power relations. In the next section, we will introduce the theoretical framework used in this study: Critical discourse analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method of Analysis

This study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) both as the theoretical framework and methods of examination. CDA as an essential methodology in critical discourse studies (CDS) is informed by theories from multiple disciplines such as linguistic theory, social theory, and critical theory. CDA is critical in that it is oriented towards challenging existing "power asymmetries, exploitation, manipulation, and structural inequalities" in fields like education (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 451). With the purpose of eliciting changes for social justice, CDA brings together social theory and discourse analysis to examine the way social practices and power relations are constructed and enacted in and through language. It explores not only what the text says but also what it does (Leotti et al., 2022). It captures "not only what is communicated, but where and how, as well as what is left unsaid and how different modes are juxtaposed" (Dorner et al., 2023, p.360). CDA enables us to analyze the dialectical relations between semiotic (language and other multi-modal texts) and other social elements by focusing on a "social wrong in its semiotic aspects", identifying the root causes of the social injustice, considering how such injustice is shaped by the social order and social practices, and finding possible ways to overcome the root causes (Fairclough,

2009, p. 7). Besides, CDA recognizes that discourse is inherently ideological and plays a significant role in perpetuating specific power dynamics and systems of domination (Fairclough, 2009). Among the many CDA strands, this study draws from James Gee and Norman Fairclough to analyze the two sources of data, due to their conceptual and analytical fit with our chosen texts under analysis.

Gee's Approach to CDA: Building Tasks Analysis

Gee (2011) argues that language is significant in three ways: it is about "saying (informing), doing (action), and being (identity)" (p. 2). Any language in use is not only information but also an action and representation of an identity. Gee (2011) proposed that people build things or "seven areas of 'reality'" using language, such as significance, practices, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems and knowledge (p. 17). According to Gee (2011), people use language (1) to enhance or lessen the *significance* of certain things, (2) to be recognized as engaging in a particular *practice* or activity, (3) to construct *identities* for the speaker/writer or for the listener/reader, (4) to signify and build *relationships* with others, (5) to make certain things count as valuable social goods such as wealth, power, and respect through the *politics* building task, (6) to build relevance or *connections* between things and (7) to assign different positions for different *languages and knowledge systems*. There are a series of relevant questions we can ask when using these building tasks for discourse analysis to uncover the networked meanings and critical implications of language use in context. The questions are presented in the findings section.

Using Gee's methods of building tasks analysis can illuminate how education texts position multilingual learners in terms of how they assign, for example, significant meanings, identities, and social values to this particular group of students through particular naming practices.

Fairclough's Approach to CDA: Social and Semiotic Analysis

Our analysis also draws from Fairclough's theories of CDA. Fairclough emphasized that his CDA framework is not a one-size-fits-all method. Rather, he argued that for specific research questions and data, researchers need to be selective in adapting and combining his framework with other methods/theories in light of the specific features of particular data. For example, Taylor (2004) adopted Fairclough's CDA to analyze educational policy documents. CDA as a "combination of linguistic analysis with social analysis" (Taylor, 2004, p. 436) views that all texts contain two aspects: social aspects and semiotic/linguistic aspects. The analysis of social aspects provides us with insights into the social context of the text, such as the social events and practices related to the text, shaped by certain social order. The analysis of semiotic/linguistic aspects allows us to closely examine the text itself using the three main tools in semiotic analysis: *genre, discourse,* and *style*. Genres are the ways of interacting with the intended audience, discourses are ways of representing main ideas, and styles are ways of being, that is, certain identities (Fairclough, 2010). Specifically, the analytical framework contains two intertwined dimensions: "interdiscursive analysis" and "linguistic analysis." Interdiscursive analysis emphasizes the social aspects of the text. Applying to this study, we mainly focus on identifying salient ideological positions from the text and examining their implications within the broader social contexts. Linguistic analysis of genre, discourse, and style of the text mainly focuses on aspects such as lexicalization, revoicing, and voice, to identify how the text interacts with the intended audience, represents the main ideas, and enacts key identities in relation to social contexts. Together interdiscursive linguistic analysis reveals critical insights into specific social practices/contexts by investigating the language features of the text.

Methods

Data Sources

The two sources of texts we chose to analyze are (1) a 50-state comparison of the labels and definitions of multilingual learners (extracted from federal and state policies) and (2) the 2020 edition of WIDA ELD standards. The 50-state comparison, published in May 2020, is located on the website of the Education Commission of the States (https://reports.ecs.org/comparisons/50-state-comparison-english-learner-policies-05). The terms and definitions used by different states to classify multilingual learners were presented in a table on the webpage, providing a comprehensive overview of all the terms across 50 states and enabling analysis of the position of multilingual learners at the policy level. We highlight that due to the lengthy process involved in policy change, even if the policy text we are analyzing may have undergone revisions since 2020, we opted for a fair comparison by selecting two documents published in the same year.

In comparison to the federal and state policy documents, we chose to analyze the latest English language development (ELD) standards of WIDA, a leading inter-state consortium that provides research-based guidance for multilingual learners' education. While many states participate in WIDA and may reference its framework in their policy documents, they may not necessarily adopt the foundational ideologies behind WIDA's standards, which aim to promote "equity for multilingual learners in curriculum, instruction, and assessment" (WIDA, 2020, p. 9). The 2020 version of the standards reflects the latest research in the field, therefore, representing an influential set of guiding principles that bridges research and practice. Our analysis focused on the introduction section of the WIDA framework, the *Can Do Philosophy*, and key information from the WIDA website. The introduction section provides an overview of the document including a brief connection to the previous editions, the WIDA ELD standards statements, the organization of the WIDA framework, and WIDA's mission, vision, and values. It also explains the shift in terminology from "English language learners" to "multilingual learners," outlines the guiding principles of language development, and describes the intended audiences and applications of this framework. These sections of the WIDA document allow us to grasp WIDA's core messages and their positioning of multilingual learners within educational research.

Data Analysis

For complementarity in our analytic methods, we employed both Gee's and Fairclough's approaches. First, we utilized Gee's building tasks analysis approach to examine short excerpts from policy documents of 50 states. This framework enabled a deep, multi-perspective examination of how specific language use accomplished different building tasks. After reviewing the terms adopted by federal and state laws/policies, we compiled a summary of the terms in Table 1. Then, we closely examined all the definitions, categorized them into three types as outlined in Table 2, and presented examples of each type in our analyses for certain building tasks. The categorization is based on Webster and Lu (2012), which identified two types of labels: deficit-based and asset-based/wholistic/affirmative. We expanded on their classification by adding a neutral type, defined by neither positive nor negative word choices. While term usage is highly consistent across states, the definitions, which reveal more information about multilingual learners, show considerable variation. Thus, our classification of state policies is primarily based on the definitions instead of the terms themselves. Deficit-based definitions emphasize birthplace as a proxy for English proficiency and are characterized by negative word choices such as "inability" and "difficulty." Asset-based definitions acknowledge the value of students' home languages and cultures, utilizing positive and inclusive words like "linguistically diverse." Neutral definitions avoid both positive and negative

word choices, instead specifying identification standards based on assessment results rather than solely emphasizing students' place of origin or home language.

In comparison, we applied Fairclough's CDA approach, which is well-suited for analyzing extensive texts, to analyze the WIDA document. We conducted interdiscursive analysis to reveal ideological positions embedded in the text. Specific linguistic features of the text were analyzed in terms of genre, discourse, and style to examine whether and how they reinforced the identified ideological positions and the associated social practices.

Table 1

Terms Used in the 50 States

Terms	States	Number*
English Learner(s); English-Language Learners (*with or without the dash*)	**The federal law**, Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Arkansas, Colorado, Idaho, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Oregon, Rhode Island, Wyoming	38 (17** states use federal definition)
Limited English Proficient	Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Montana, Texas, Wisconsin,	8
Student/Pupils		
Eligible Students	Connecticut, Washington	2
Children of Limited English-Speaking Ability	Michigan, New Jersey	2
Students Learning English	Utah	1

Note: "Number*" indicates the number of states that adopt the label. The 17 states that use the term/definition of the federal law or the Department of Education EL guidebooks are not listed in this table. Arizona uses two terms.

Table 2

Three Types of Definitions Used in the Analysis with Examples

Type	Origin	Term	Definition
Deficit-based definition: Negative word choices ("inability", "difficulty"), national-origin-based identification standards.	Federal	English Learner	An individual: (1) who is aged 3 through 21 (2) who is enrolled or preparing to enroll in an elementary school or secondary school (3) (i) who was <u>not born in the United States</u> or whose native language is a language other than English (ii) who is a Native American or Alaska Native, or a native resident of the outlying areas and <u>who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual's level of English language proficiency</u> or (iii) who is <u>migratory</u>, whose native language is a language other than English, and who comes from an

Type	Origin	Term	Definition
			environment where a language other than English is dominant and (4) whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual (i) the ability to meet the challenging State academic standards (ii) the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English or (iii) the opportunity to participate fully in society.
Deficit-based definitions: Negative word choices ("inability", "difficulty"), national-origin-based identification standards.	Kansas	Limited English Proficient Pupils	National origin-minority pupils who because of their inability to speak, read, write and/or understand the English language are excluded from effective participation in the educational programs offered by a school district.
	Washington	Eligible Student	A student whose primary language is other than English and whose English skills are sufficiently deficient or absent to impair learning, for purposes of eligibility for the transitional bilingual program.
	Wisconsin	Limited-English Proficient Pupil	A pupil whose ability to use the English language is limited because of the use of a non-English language in his or her family or in his or her daily, non-school surroundings, and who has difficulty, as defined by rule by the state superintendent, in performing ordinary classwork in English as a result of such limited English language proficiency.
	Iowa	Limited English Proficient	A student who has a language background other than English, and the proficiency in English is such that the probability of the student's academic success in an English-only classroom is below that of an academically successful peer with an English language background.
	Illinois	English Learners	(1) all children in grades pre-K through 12 who were not born in the United States, whose native tongue is a language other than English, and who are incapable of performing ordinary classwork in English, and (2) all children in grades pre-K through 12 who were born in the United States of parents possessing no or limited English-speaking ability and who are incapable of performing ordinary classwork in English.

Type	Origin	Term	Definition
Asset-based definitions: Positive wording, explicitly mentioning education equity for MLs, showing respect for students' primary languages.	Louisiana	English Language Learners	Children working to learn a second language (English) while continuing to develop their first (or home) language.
	Connecticut	Eligible Students	Students enrolled in public schools in grades kindergarten to twelve, inclusive, whose dominant language is other than English and whose proficiency in English is not sufficient to assure equal educational opportunity in the regular school program.
	Colorado	English Language Learner	A student who is linguistically diverse and who is identified as having a level of English language proficiency that requires language support to achieve standards in grade-level content in English.
Neutral definitions: Neither negative nor positive wording, identification based on assessment instead of place of origin or home language.	Kentucky	English Learners	Students currently identified on an English language proficiency exam for purposes of the indicators of growth and transition readiness metrics.
	Maine	English Learner	A student who has a primary or home language other than English, as determined by a language use survey developed by the department; who is not yet proficient in English, as determined by a state-approved English language proficiency assessment; and who satisfies the federal definition.
	Georgia	English Learners	Students whose primary or home language is other than English and who are eligible for services based on the results of an English language proficiency assessment.
	Idaho	English Language Learner	A student who does not score proficient on the English language development assessment established by rule of the state board of education.

Note: It is noted that the classifications are based on Webster and Lu (2012) and the authors' subjective analysis of the definitions with attention to word choices, underlying assumptions, and identification criteria.

Findings

In this section, we will introduce the major insights gained from critically analyzing the two texts through Gee's and Fairclough's frameworks. First, the terms used by 50 states are critiqued, and then findings about the definitions are grouped around the seven building tasks. Last, we present our findings from the WIDA document analysis.

Building Tasks Analysis of Labeling and Definitions in Policy Documents

As shown in Table 1, 33 states used their own terms and definitions, while the rest of the states adopted the federally-defined terms (English learners or English language learners), found in the Department of Education's EL guidebooks. English language learners (ELLs) and limited English proficient students/pupils (LEPs) are commonly used by 45 states. Although Michigan and New Jersey (children of limited English-speaking ability), and Utah (students learning English) employ slightly different names, they share the same underlying focus on "the English language learning component" that characterizes ELL and LEP designations – what Gates (2010, as cited in Webster & Lu, 2012, p. 90) describes as "only one facet of their being." This narrow focus disregards other contributing elements that shape students' overall identity. The term LEP is particularly problematic, carrying highly negative connotations through its explicit labeling of this student group as having "limited" ability in English. This linguistic framing underscores only limitations instead of their potential, problematizing their linguistic differences against the English norm instead of leveraging diversity. Such terminology reflects policymakers' subscription to an English-only, monolingual ideology, which equates English proficiency as the sole standard for assessing these students' learning potential. In contrast, Connecticut and Washington state use a unique name, eligible students, highlighting the student's eligibility to enroll in language support programs. This terminology foregrounds the students' eligibility status to receive language support programs, shifting the emphasis away from their current English proficiency levels and towards supportive systems. By highlighting eligibility rather than limitations, this term suggests the provision of language support programs to facilitate students' linguistic development. While eligible students still reflect the English-dominant ideology, its negative implications are less explicit compared to the term LEP.

Seven Building Tasks Analysis

Gee's building tasks analysis further reveals misalignment between these state-defined labels and their implications. For example, a seemingly positive label may carry deficit-oriented assumptions. The following analysis, which employed Gee's seven building tasks with each guided by specific critical questions, examines the nuanced implications of the terms like ELLs and LEPs.

Significance Building Task Analysis (BTA) for the Question: *How is this piece of language being used to make certain things significant or not and in what ways?* (Gee, 2011, p. 17). In the policy documents, students' primary language not being English is a crucial factor in defining the identity of an "English learner" in all states. Some definitions including the federal one, which states that "a language *other than English* has had *a significant impact* on the individual's level of English language proficiency" (emphasis added), implicitly frames students' home language as impediments to their English proficiency, and such negative impact was made *significant* in students' English development/acquisition. This negative connotation was further reinforced through an explicit connection to students' lower English proficiency levels, as reflected in the deficit-based definition "…because of their inability to speak, read, write and/or understand the English language are excluded from effective participation in the educational programs" (Kansas). Through intimidating word choices like "inability" and "excluded," policymakers establish English proficiency as a significant prerequisite for content classroom participation while positioning other languages as deficits and obstacles to achieving the intended learning goal in content classrooms.

Practice BTA for the Question: *What practice (activity) or practices (activities) is this piece of language being used to enact (i.e., get others to recognize as going on)?* (p. 18). An English-only learning

environment is established as the normative practice in U.S. schools, as reflected in Iowa's definition:

> A student who has a language background other than English, and the proficiency in English is such that the probability of the student's academic success in an English-only classroom is below that of an academically successful peer with an English language background. (emphasis added)

The repeated emphasis on "English-only classroom" across state definitions suggests an entrenched ideology of English as the only language of instruction, resisting instructional adaptation for new classroom dynamics. In addition, as English proficiency is the main criterion in making decisions for the educational practices for multilingual students, deficit-focused labels and definitions limit our understanding of this diverse student group. For instance, not all "migrant students" who speak another language at home struggle with English comprehension. Many children are, in fact, simultaneous bilinguals who acquire two languages simultaneously from birth (Amengual, 2019). Taking the primary language as the major criterion to determine the student's learning deficit may misplace proficient bilingual students, in an unsuitable position, potentially limiting their educational experience to solely English development. A deficit view toward their primary language also obstructs the practice of bilingual education, especially impeding developmental bilingual programs designed to foster students' bilingualism/biliteracy (García, 2009a). Additionally, from a heteroglossic lens, bilinguals' language practices always draw from their linguistic repertoire, incorporating features from both home languages and English, which makes deficit views of home languages even more unreasonable (García & Woodley, 2014). Furthermore, unfavorable assumptions about students' home languages - reflected in biased views regarding their impact on English learning, as seen in most definitions, can negatively shape students' perceptions of language and culture. This is particularly impactful for younger children eager for peer acceptance at school, potentially limiting their development of intercultural competence and openness to the diverse, multilingual world.

Identity BTA for the Question: *What identity or identities is this piece of language being used to enact (i.e., get others to recognize as operative)? What identity or identities is this piece of language attributing to others and how does this help the speaker or writer enact his or her own identity?* (p. 18). Deficit views, rooted in the English-only monolingual ideology in U.S. schools, significantly impact multilingual learners' identity construction. Most states frame low English proficiency level and language diversity as a problem to be fixed, while devaluing their home languages. Identified as *outsiders* and *disadvantaged kids* compared with their English-dominant peers, these students are expected to be less successful in school as explicitly stated in the following definition: "the probability of the student's academic success in an English-only classroom is below that of an academically successful peer with an English language background" (Iowa). In contrast, a few states employed asset-based definitions that reflect a multilingual ideology. For example, Louisiana defines multilingual learners as "children working to learn a second language (English) while continuing to develop their first (or home) language" while Colorado defines them as "a student who is linguistically diverse…" (Colorado). These definitions, realized by positive and inclusive linguistic choices, acknowledge multilingual students' concurrent language acquisition process and thus recognize their unique linguistic and cultural identities. However, it is worth noting that even states with asset-based definitions retain the term "English language learner," demonstrating the persistent tension between asset-oriented terms and socially dominant labels. This underscores the need to critically evaluate such terms and their implications for students' identity development. It also requires education entities to align their use of language with their professed vision of equitable education.

Relationship BTA for the Question: *What sort of relationship or relationships is this piece of language seeking to enact with others (present or not)?* (p. 19). Policymakers enact different relationships with multilingual learners through either deficit-based or asset-based stances. Deficit-oriented policymakers use language that foresees and manifests a distant and rigid relationship with students, characterized by an apparent lack of inclusivity and appreciation for diversity. They seem to neglect and try to diminish multilingual learners' home languages by positioning them as barriers, exemplified in Wisconsin's statement that students' "ability to use the English language is limited because of the use of a non-English language in his or her family...." Negative and non-inclusive word choices, such as those emphasizing "inability" and "difficulty" to command English adequately, contributes to the marginalization of multilingual learners by disempowering teachers and English-dominant peers from building culturally and linguistically responsive and capable relationships. In such scenarios, multilingual learners are not validated as valuable community members with unique linguistic and cultural capitals.

Politics BTA for the Question: *What perspectives on social goods is this piece of language communicating? What is communicated as to what is taken to be normal, right, good, correct, proper, appropriate, valuable, the ways things are, the ways things ought to be, high status or low status, like me or not like me, and so forth?* (p. 19). In the policy documents, English proficiency is repeatedly promoted as valuable social goods for all students. Individuals born in English-dominant U.S. territories are inherently entitled to receive and leverage this social good as it positions them as the standard from which other language speakers deviate, leading them to potentially excel academically and socially. Additionally, English as the only language of instruction is seen as normal and appropriate across states. This ideology marginalizes students who are not identified as a native or proficient-enough English speaker. As the federal policy notes, this can deny these students "the opportunity to participate fully in society," suggesting that full citizenship and social acceptance are implicitly tied to English language proficiency.

Connection BTA for the Question: *How does this piece of language connect or disconnect things? How does it make one thing relevant or irrelevant to another?* (p. 19). First, students' place of origin is associated/connected with their English abilities. The federal definition of EL revoiced the consideration of place of origin through words/expressions like "not born in the United States," "Native American or Alaska Native," "resident of the outlying areas," and "migratory." As guided by this standard, many states categorize students based on birthplace, creating a stark division between those born in U.S. English-speaking regions and those from other countries or minority communities. Second, students' ability in their home language is explicitly connected with their "inability" in English. As in Wisconsin's definition, their English language is "limited <u>because of</u> the use of a non-English language in his or her family." By using "because of" which clearly indicates a causal relation, multilingual learners' limited English proficiency is attributed to their use of other languages. Third, students' English proficiency is connected to their ability and eligibility to participate in content classroom learning, as evidenced in "whose English skills are sufficiently deficient or absent to impair learning" (Illinois), and "who has <u>difficulty...in performing ordinary classwork in English as a result of such limited English language proficiency"</u> (Wisconsin). The assumption behind this connection is that multilingual learners are not ready nor capable of performing well in content classrooms due to their limited English skills. Through these problematic connections, the policy endorses the ideological belief that falsely equates students' English proficiency with their cognitive capacity to learn content knowledge and absolves the responsibility of content classroom teachers to make content accessible for multilingual students and concurrently support their language development and content learning. In other words, the exclusive focus on

English disregards multilingual learners' learning potentials and their existing abilities at multiple dimensions - linguistic, cognitive, cultural, and socioemotional.

Sign Systems and Knowledge BTA for the Question: *How does this piece of language privilege or deprivilege specific sign systems…, or different ways of knowing and believing or claims of knowledge and belief?* (p. 20). The English-only ideology codified in the policy of English-only instruction establishes a clear hierarchy, privileging Standard American English (SAE) over other English variations and named languages. In all deficit-based and neutral definitions, only the value of English is revoiced, while the value of multilingual learners' home languages is completely absent. For example, only Colorado and Louisiana acknowledge "linguistic diversity" and the importance of "continuing to develop their first language" in their definitions, while other states frame students' multilingualism as detrimental to their academic success. The underlying rationale is that SAE and mainstream cultural capital are the valued sign system and knowledges that enable students to succeed in school and broader society.

Interdiscursive Linguistic Analysis of WIDA ELD Standards

In the section below, we present the CDA of WIDA ELD Standards. The WIDA Consortium, now an inter-state organization involving 41 states and federal education agencies, was originally established by a federal grant project to comply with the No Child Left Behind Act (Molle, 2014). Through collaborative research endeavors to foster equitable education for multilingual learners, WIDA has significantly influenced the instructional and assessment practices for this student group. Our CDA of the WIDA ELD Standards interweaves both social and semiotic dimensions to unveil the interactive dynamics involved in shaping the standards. Particularly, we present the four ideological positions identified from our interdiscursive linguistic analysis. The analytic details encompass the social dimension where WIDA's stances are situated and the semiotic dimension where specific linguistic features and language choices support WIDA's ideological positions. Faircloughian tripartite CDA further elaborates how WIDA interacts with the intended audience (genre), represents key ideas about multilingual learner education (discourse), and identifies the students (style) through specific language choices.

WIDA's Four Ideological Positions within Larger Social Context

Position 1: Ensuring Equal Educational Opportunities for Multilingual Learners. WIDA foregrounds this position as its first Big Idea, explicitly and repeatedly featuring it throughout the document. On the cover page of the document, "Promote equity for multilingual learners" is placed right below the title. Additionally, social justice is one of the values held by WIDA, paraphrased as "challenging linguistic discrimination, cultural biases, and racism in education" (WIDA, n.d.-b, Values section). These statements convey WIDA's commitment to promoting equitable educational opportunities for multilingual students, with a firm stance against linguistic and cultural discrimination.

Position 2: **Constructing an Asset-based Discourse of Multilingual Learners**. WIDA's evolution in student labeling reflects a salient ideological shift. Whereas previous versions of WIDA (2004, 2007, 2012) used "ELL," the 2020 edition updated the term to "multilingual learners," devoting a block of text and visuals to define the term:

> 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-TELs), 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. (p. 11, emphasis added)

This transition from "English language learner" to "multilingual learner" indicates a shift from the English-only to the English-plus or multilingual ideology. In contrast to federal and state policy documents, the definition of multilingual learners is carefully crafted to avoid framing students' home languages and English as conflictual entities or forces in student development. Instead, it validates the critical role of both English and home languages for student learning. However, one notable gap remains: WIDA does not explicitly address English-dominant students who are learning an additional language in dual language programs. While these students are technically dual language learners (DLLs), WIDA's (2014) description of DLLs primarily addresses children learning English alongside their home language(s), reflecting the organization's focus on heritage language speakers.

Another observation that speaks to an asset-based discourse is that WIDA values the unique identities of multilingual learners and takes their linguistic, cultural, experiential, social, and emotional characteristics as enriching resources for the entire learning community. This belief system is contrastive with the English-only ideology prevalent in policy documents. For example, the following statements from WIDA's guiding principles of language development capture the asset-based perspective toward multilingual learners and their backgrounds:

> **Principle 1:** Multilingual learners' languages and cultures are valuable resources to be leveraged for schooling and classroom life; leveraging these assets and challenging biases help develop multilingual learners' independence and encourage their agency in learning.
> **Principle 2:** Multilingual learners' development of multiple languages enhances their knowledge and cultural bases, their intellectual capacities, and their flexibility in language use.
> **Principle 5:** Multilingual learners use and develop language when opportunities for learning take into account their individual experiences, characteristics, abilities, and levels of language proficiency. (WIDA, 2020, p. 12, emphasis added)

Likewise, WIDA's Can Do Philosophy further reinforces the values multilingual learners bring to the learning community:

> Linguistically and culturally diverse learners, in particular, bring a unique set of assets that have the potential to enrich the experiences of all learners and educators. As these young children and students learn additional languages, educators can draw on these assets for the benefit of both the learners themselves and for everyone in the community. (2019, p. 1, emphasis added)

Through this asset-based position, WIDA recognizes multilingual learners' agency in expressing and constructing their identities, rejecting passive assimilation into the EL label and English-only ideologies.

Position 3: Advancing Multimodal and Integrated Pedagogy for Multilingual Learners. As one of the 10 guiding principles of language development, WIDA explicitly advocates multimodal pedagogy, stating that "multilingual learners use and develop language through activities which intentionally integrate multiple modalities, including oral, written, visual, and kinesthetic modes of communication" (p. 12). Furthermore, in alignment with CLIL (content and language integrated learning), an integrated pedagogy that originated in Europe (García, 2009a), WIDA

endorses the integration of language and content education as its second Big Idea. Departing from the conventional separatist approach of offering distinct language programs to multilingual students or segregating them from the majority of students in self-contained ESL classes or schools, this method allows students to acquire English proficiency while learning content knowledge. As argued by Westerlund (2021), "Language is best learned in the service of disciplinary learning, not separate from content areas, and, conversely, content cannot be learned without a sustained attention to language" (p. 49). WIDA explicitly endorses integrating content and language learning, as this approach provides ample opportunities for multilingual learners to engage in natural language use and multimodal communication across diverse content classrooms. Each classroom offers different disciplinary contexts and language patterns, as well as multimodal pathways for them to access and demonstrate their learning.

Position 4: **Hybridizing Educational and Promotional Identities of WIDA.** Drawing on the discourse of neoliberalism, exemplified by the "Mission, Vision, Values" framework commonly used by corporations to establish and advertise their brands, WIDA enacts its identity as a high-end educational brand. Through a mixture of educational and promotional language, WIDA positions itself as both an educational leader and a profitable institution serving clients.

> **Vision**: To be the most trusted and valued resource in supporting the education of multilingual learners.
>
> **One of its Values**: Service: Exceeding expectations with trusted and knowledgeable support of our clients and stakeholders. (WIDA website, all emphasis added)

Within the text, promotional language is evident through phrases like "the most trusted and valued," "exceeding expectations," and references to "clients." The Can Do Philosophy further reveals this market orientation through terminology, such as "how we design our products" (2019, p. 1) and "WIDA store products" with contact information at the bottom of the WIDA website for its customers. WIDA constructs its dual identity as a leading educational organization and a product provider serving educators of multilingual learners. Consequently, highlighting the value of the multilingual student group and continuously improving its standards of service through up-to-date research becomes a foremost promotional strategy. Unlike policy documents by governing bodies positioned as an authority to enforce the top-down policies, WIDA standards reflect their mediating role between policy and practice to meet the changing needs of the increasingly multilingual society which witnesses the growing diversity, demanding recognition of multilingual groups and their values. This positioning serves a dual purpose: while advocating for equitable education for multilingual learners through research-based frameworks, it simultaneously works to attract educators and policymakers as customers. In other words, its emphasis on the state-of-the-art research for multilingual learners, therefore, serves both pedagogical and marketing functions, demonstrating educational expertise while strengthening its leading position for key education stakeholders.

Analysis of Genre, Discourse, and Style of WIDA

WIDA's major ideological positions can be further illuminated by the analysis of its genre (ways of interacting with WIDA's stakeholders), discourse (ways of representing asset-based ideologies toward multilingual learner education), and style (ways of being/WIDA's identities) (Fairclough, 2010).

Genre. WIDA operates within an educational context intended to shape policy for educating multilingual learners, reflected in its formal, assertive, and engaging language. The genre of WIDA is informational, political, and promotional. This combined genre serves multiple purposes: presenting and advocating new educational frameworks with foundational principles for equitable education,

while building support among key stakeholders, particularly educators and policymakers as a leading and professional education entity. It provides research-based frameworks and pedagogical guidance that promote innovative, collaborative, and asset-based approach in teaching multilingual learners. To establish its authority as a leading organization in the field, WIDA features its ELA Standards contributors on its website, stating "WIDA's leadership team brings extensive expertise in the fields of language education, test development, research, policy and professional learning, in addition to operational strength in marketing, finance, information technology and human resources" (n.d.-a). To root itself in the work of advocating for equity for multilingual learners and to garner support from policymakers and students, WIDA calls for an ideology shift from the traditional "language-as-problem" to "language-as-resource" (Ruíz, 1984). WIDA advocates a new naming practice using the term "multilingual learners," making a critical update from previous versions. Accordingly, throughout its materials, WIDA consistently portrays multilingual learners as capable agents with unique linguistic and cultural capacities and resources, emphasizing their contributions to the rich diversity of society.

Discourse. The main discursive message in the document is advocacy for equitable education for multilingual learners by using positive word choices to foreground multilingual learners' unique resources instead of solely focusing on English proficiency. This strength-based framework is exemplified in WIDA's (2020) introduction to its mission, vision, and values:

> WIDA draws its strength from its mission, vision, and values—the Can Do Philosophy, innovation, service, collaboration, and social justice. This belief system underscores the cultural, social, emotional, and experiential assets of multilingual learners, their families, and educators. It acts as a unifying force that gives the consortium its strength of conviction and action throughout the PreK-12 education community. (p. 11)

Several discursive devices were employed to reinforce the discourse of multilingual learners as assets. Through lexicalization (i.e., purposeful choice of particular vocabulary words), WIDA iteratively builds the equity-oriented, asset-based frameworks for education of multilingual learners, using vocabulary such as "innovation," "collaboration," "justice," "assets," "strength," and "unifying" within the mission statement, explicitly acknowledging multilingual learners as a valuable and integral group. The revoicing technique is employed to repeatedly emphasize the value of multilingual learners and their distinct resources (Position 1 and 2), shifting focus away from English proficiency deficits. Its asset-based "belief system" concerning multilingual learners, their families, and educators is consistently reinforced across all Positions (especially Position 1-3) as the foundation for ensuring equitable education opportunities.

Style. WIDA predominantly employs an active voice to enact itself as a confident and authoritative entity. For example, "WIDA advances academic language development and academic achievement for children and youth who are culturally and linguistically diverse through high quality standards, assessments, research, and professional learning for educators" (2020, p. 11). "It acts as a unifying force that gives the consortium its strength of conviction and action throughout the PreK-12 education community" (p. 11). By using active voice, WIDA emphasizes its role as the actor and clearly establishes its responsibility for what the organization advocates for. This direct attribution of accountability highlights WIDA's leading role in and commitment to guiding multilingual learner educators' practices as an inclusive and trustworthy professional partner. Additionally, active voice is easier to understand and more engaging, which is especially fitting for WIDA, as it not only leads as an authoritative educational institution but also operates as a profitable organization. As a product provider, educators of multilingual learners are also their clients, which grants them the right to

negotiate with WIDA which serves as the seller. Therefore, a more equal relationship is established, compared to the one between educators and policymakers. It would be interesting to dig deeper into this dual relationship (Position 4) between WIDA and educators in future studies.

Discussion

According to Gee (2011, 2014), a fine-grained analysis of language can reveal one's *figured worlds,* "a theory, story, model, or image of a simplified world that captures what is taken to be typical or normal about people, practices (activities), things, or interactions" (2014, p. 226). It also reveals *Discourse* (as opposed to small d-discourse as everyday language-in-use), which is the combination of language, ways of thinking, behaving, interacting, believing, and other aspects of enacting a specific identity (Gee, 2011). The terms used for multilingual learners together with the definitions are part of the Discourse around this diverse group of students. An asset-based term and definition conjures an inclusive and positive image of multilingual learners which helps them enact a more comprehensive and multilingual identity. In contrast, a deficit-based Discourse could limit their identity building by suppressing their home languages and cultures, which, as a consequence, may potentially limit their development.

The dominant position of English in the school system, as reflected in most state policies, requires multilingual learners to acquire English as soon as possible, often at the expense of their other language resources, to transition from perceived "outsiders" to "insiders." In such a figured world, the story of assimilation is typical and normal for multilingual learners and their families. Moreover, the concept of English proficiency, which is at the core of all definitions, needs to be understood in specific situated contexts. The analysis reveals that multilingual students' English proficiency is assessed differently across states, with different state policy contexts shaping the significance and identity of multilingual learners in distinct ways. A multilingual learner may be viewed as having limited English proficiency in certain states, potentially resulting in problematic labeling, placement, and treatment. In contrast, the same student might be recognized as a mainstream student with greater learning potential in other states. The positive or negative connotation embedded in local policies can significantly influence how these students are perceived and treated by peers, teachers, schools, and community members. These perceptions are shaped by different Figured Worlds and Discourses about multilingual learners within the given educational system.

In this paper, we attempted to unravel, through CDA, how multilingual learners are positioned in policies and the guiding research document alongside the linguistic ideologies held by policymakers vs. researchers. Generally, in policy texts, multilingual learners have predominantly been constructed as a disadvantaged group in terms of their perceived probability of achieving success in school and society. As shown in the analysis, the educational system often fails to value and utilize bilingualism as a potential asset (Martínez, 2018), with an English-only ideology remaining pervasive and entrenched in most, if not all, state policies. This ideological stance becomes particularly evident when examining in comparison to WIDA standards, which reflect a markedly different ideology regarding bilingualism and the potential of multilingual learners. WIDA is driven by and representing a highly asset-oriented ideology about multilingual learners who are positioned as having a high potential of achieving success in rigorous language and content learning and who contribute valuable linguistic, cultural, and experiential resources to the learning of all students. Although WIDA has been adopted by most states, the transformation of foundational ideologies that have long underpinned federal and state policies is likely to be a gradual and protracted process.

Conclusion and Limitations

The labels assigned to multilingual students reflect and reinforce specific underlying language ideologies. Our analysis reveals a distinct contrast between policy contexts and academic or professional contexts. Terms like ELLs and LEPs, prevalent in policy documents, concentrate on students' limited English abilities, placing English at the center of evaluation. This approach can work as a dividing force, separating English-dominant students and multilingual learners apart. Despite research implications from the field of bilingual/multilingual education and recommendations from language education scholars involved in the WIDA Standards development, most federal and state policymakers continue to use the term ELL for this significant growing student group in the United States. In contrast, WIDA presents a new voice in evaluating the multilingual community. It promotes equitable educational opportunities for all while exhibiting a commitment to multilingualism and diversity, qualities essential in today's world. To progress equitably in education, policymakers and education professionals must collaborate to bridge the gap between their views of multilingual learners and address changing social demographics toward a more just and equitable society. The first step, we argue, is to adopt more appropriate, asset-oriented labels for students who speak languages other than English, such as "multilingual learners" and "emergent bilinguals" because the language we use is not merely shaped by the dominant ideologies but also has the power to reshape them and influence social practices.

At the same time, it is essential to recognize that merely swapping labels does not suffice to dismantle deficit language ideologies and associated social practices (Kanno et al., 2024). We must also critically reflect on the appropriateness and purpose of the act of labeling itself in the educational context. While we advocate for the use of more asset-oriented labels as an effort to transform the deficit ideology toward language diversity and highlight multilingual students' strengths and unique resources, it is important to remain cautious of the labels we give to students, especially when we use acronyms of these labels (e.g. ML, EB). The issue with acronyms is that they often cause us to lose sight of the original asset-based term we intended to use, reducing it to an abstraction devoid of its positive and nuanced meaning. Over time, these abbreviations can become ideologically loaded and unintentionally shift their meaning and significance. In this way, acronyms can subtly shape perceptions, sometimes even manipulating understanding or undermining the values they were meant to uphold. Moreover, we need to be aware that the labels we discussed are unique to the U.S. school context, while in some other countries, most of these labels do not exist at all. As researchers, educators, or policymakers, we may ask ourselves: why is labelling necessary? Can we talk about students based on the specific focus of our discussion? For example, if emphasizing their multilingual abilities, we could call them "multilingual learners." If addressing language support needs, we might refer to them as "students needing language support," or if we want to focus on the numerous issues that refugee background students have, we could call them "students with refugee experiences" or other terms that relate to their experiences. This way, we can avoid reducing students to a single label while acknowledging their unique experiences. No matter which label(s) we choose, it is crucial to remember that, while labels are often used to define student groups, they can never fully capture or define the potential of individual students, regardless of the group to which they are assigned.

Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback and insightful comments, which have significantly improved this work.

References

Amengual, M. (2019). Type of early bilingualism and its effect on the acoustic realization of allophonic variants: Early sequential and simultaneous bilinguals. *International Journal of Bilingualism, 23*(5), 954-970. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006917741364

Blommaert, J., & Bulcaen, C. (2000). Critical discourse analysis. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 29*(1), 447-466. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.29.1.447

Cunningham, C. (2019). Terminological tussles: Taking issue with "English as an additional language" and "languages other than English." *Power and Education*, *11*(1), 121-128. https://doi.org/10.1177/1757743818806919

Dorner, M. L., Kim, S., Bonny, E., & Montes, I. C. (2023). Using critical discourse analysis to challenge and change educational practice and policy. In M. D. Young, & S. Diem (Eds.), *Handbook on critical approaches to education research* (pp. 356-376). Routledge.

Education Commission of the States. (2020, May). *50-state comparison: English learner policies*. https://reports.ecs.org/comparisons/50-state-comparison-english-learner-policies-05

Fairclough, N. (2009). A dialectical-relational approach to critical discourse analysis in social research. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourseanalysis*. Sage.

Fairclough, N. (2010). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Routledge.

García, O., & Baetens Beardsmore, H. (2009a). *Bilingual education in the 21st century: A global perspective*. Wiley-Blackwell.

García, O. (2009b). Emergent bilinguals and TESOL: What's in a name? *TESOL Quarterly, 43*(2), 322-326. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1545-7249.2009.tb00172.x

García, O., & Woodley, H. H. (2014). Bilingual education. In M. Bigelow & J. Ennser-Kananen (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of educational linguistics*. Routledge.

Gee, J. P. (2011). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (3rd ed). Routledge.

Gee, J. P. (2014). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (4th ed). Routledge.

Kanno, Y., Rios-Aguilar, C., & Bunch, G. C. (2024). English learners? Emergent bilinguals? Multilingual learners? Goals, contexts, and consequences in labeling students. *TESOL Journal*, *15*(3), e797. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.797

Khan, S. S. (2020). A narrative literature review of the identity negotiation of bilingual students who are labelled ESL. *Interchange*, *51*(4), 361-383. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-019-09381-1

Leotti, S. M., Sugrue, E. P., & Winges-Yanez, N. (2022). Unpacking the worlds in our words: Critical discourse analysis and social work inquiry. *Qualitative Social Work*, *21*(2), 260-276. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325021990860

Martínez, R. A. (2018). Beyond the English learner label: Recognizing the richness of bi/multilingual students' linguistic repertoires. *The Reading Teacher*, *71*(5), 515-522. https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1679

Molle, D. (2014). *High quality professional development for English language learners*. WIDA Research Report. https://wida.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/resource/Research-Report-High-Quality-PD-for-ELLs.pdf

National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). (2023, May). *English language learners in public schools*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgf

Oral, Y. (2015). The challenge of native-speakerism in ELT: Labelling and categorising. In A. Swan, P. Aboshiha & A. Holliday (Eds.), *(En)countering Native-speakerism: Global perspectives*. Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Orwell, G. (1949). *1984*. Secker & Warburg.

Potowski, K. (2010). *Language diversity in the USA*. Cambridge University Press.

Rogers, R. (Ed.). (2011). *An introduction to critical discourse analysis in education* (2nd ed.). Routledge. http://cw.routledge.com/textbooks/9780415874298/

Ruíz, R. (1984). Orientations in language planning. *NABE Journal, 8*(2), 15-34. https://doi.org/10.1080/08855072.1984.10668464

Taylor, S. (2004). Researching educational policy and change in 'new times': Using critical discourse analysis. *Journal of Education Policy*, *19*(4), 433-451. https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093042000227483

Webster, N. L., & Lu, C. (2012). "English language learners": An analysis of perplexing ESL-related terminology. *Language and Literacy*, *14*(3), 83-94. https://doi.org/10.20360/G28593

Westerlund, R (2021, June). Using standards as an advocacy framework. *Language Magazine*, 48-51. https://www.languagemagazine.com/june-2021-online-edition/

WIDA. (2014). *Focus on the early years: Dual language learners*. The Wisconsin Center for Education Research. https://wida.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/resource/FocusOn-EarlyYears.pdf

WIDA. (2019). *Can do philosophy*. https://wida.wisc.edu/resources/can-do-philosophy

WIDA. (2020). *WIDA English language development standards framework, 2020 edition: Kindergarten–grade 12*. Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System.

WIDA. (n.d.-a). *Leadership*. https://wida.wisc.edu/about/teams/leadership

WIDA. (n.d.-b). *Mission and history*. https://wida.wisc.edu/about/mission-history

Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Methods for critical discourse analysis*. Sage.

About the Authors

Dai Gu
George Mason University
dgu4@gmu.edu
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1969-970X
PhD candidate in the Multilingual Multicultural Education program at the College of Education and Human Development, George Mason University. Her research interests focus on translanguaging, language assessment, artificial intelligence integration in assessment for multilingual learners, and research methodology.

Sujin Kim
George Mason University
Skim222@gmu.edu
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4219-454X
Associate professor in College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. Her research and teaching areas include education of culturally and linguistically diverse students, translanguaging and transmodaliging pedagogy, content and language integrated instruction, and critical discourse analysis.

education policy analysis archives

Volume 33 Number 18 March 4, 2025 ISSN 1068-2341