



If We Must Label Language Learners: EL vs. MLL

by [Raichle Farrelly](#)

What’s in a label? In this article, I reflect on the labels that we use in our field to refer to those learning English as an additional language, and how those labels matter. A few of my intersecting identities—linguist, teacher educator, TESOL program director, language learner, activist—demand that I reflect on the role language plays in assigning social meaning and contributing to identity formation.

One of my favorite classes in my Introduction to Linguistics course entails an exploration of “everyday language you didn’t know was racist.” Students often experience some dissonance when trying to think differently about language they have used for a lifetime (“I can’t say ‘gyped’ anymore?!”). I share with them that when we reach the other side of deep reflection and enact language practices that uplift—rather than oppress—it can be liberating. It’s important to dive in and consider how our language impacts others. In fact, our words can create counter narratives, redistribute power, and contribute to a deeper understanding of one another.

The terms we use to refer to others (and ourselves) will constantly evolve—until they don’t. In a [1994 op-ed piece](#) for *The New York Times*, Pinker wrote “The euphemism treadmill shows that concepts, not words, are in charge: give a concept a new name, and the name becomes colored by the concept; the concept does not become freshened by the name.” However, he goes on to assert that when the labels used for certain groups remain, we have reached a place of mutual respect. Can you think of positive or neutral labels for groups that have stood the test of time?

Despite the challenges faced in coming to some semblance of agreement about terminology, words and labels matter, and one way to show up for underrepresented or marginalized populations is to lean in, listen, and (un)learn. Many of us, for example, have learned the meaning behind each part of the acronyms BIPOC and [LGBTQIA2S+](#), as well as the fact that the latter expanded acronym is neither complete nor perfect in its capacity to reflect gender complexity. Learning and reflecting on labels and applying them mindfully and with respect are ways we can elevate each other—to honor all that each brings to the table, and to make sure there is a seat at the table for everyone in the first place.

TESOL has been called to move beyond being an association committed to contributing to the research, practice, and service endeavors related to English (only) language teaching and learning. In recognition of the full linguistic repertoire of language learners and in celebration of

linguistic diversity, TESOL is increasing its focus on multilingual education, benefits of translanguaging, and ways to leverage home languages in and out of the classroom. Additionally, TESOL is aware of the need to reconsider the labels assigned to those for whom English is an additional language. In the United States, Canada, and other English-dominant countries, the labels used to denote students for whom English is not the native or home language contribute to decisions about policy, assessment, and placement in schools and programs. They also influence perceptions held about these learners by various individuals, including peers at school, teachers, community members, and politicians. Students themselves have demonstrated concerns about and resistance to how they are labeled in their schools (Oropeza, et al., 2010; Shapiro, 2014).

Critical reflections on the nature and application of deficit discourse about individuals using English as an additional language have led to an avoidance of labels such as *limited English proficient* (LEP). Seemingly more asset-oriented labels like *English language learner* (ELL) have become more commonplace. However, in their article "[Labels as Limitations](#)," Kley and Stern (2018) note that

while the new term English Language Learner (like its cousin, English Learner or EL) removes the word "limited," it still focuses on what students are lacking: English. Students are positioned not as learners of math, science, or social studies, nor as artists, athletes, or poets.

To reflect the dynamic nature of language learning as well as students' linguistic capital, García and Kleifgen (2010) proposed the term *emergent bilingual*; however, the adjective *emergent* generally means "coming into being," so for those who are advanced bilinguals, the label *emergent bilingual* seems to discount the extent to which they have developed proficiency in the language; yet *advanced bilingual* doesn't take into account newcomers who are learning a new language for the first time. Some of our colleagues embrace the label *culturally and linguistically diverse* (CLD) students. In some states in the United States, the education endorsement for teachers working with this population is referred to as a CLD endorsement. The issue some have with that label is that it doesn't distinguish those learning English as an additional language from students of various cultural backgrounds who speak varieties of English that are not legitimized in academic settings, such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Black English (BE) in the United States.

Gunderson (2020) notes that the ELL/EL category is implicitly deficit based because it homogenizes an otherwise multidimensional group of individuals—typically determining inclusion in the category on the sole feature of English ability. As TESOL practitioners, we are among the first to recognize that learners of English as an additional language vary tremendously in terms of home language(s), cultural background, age, gender, socioeconomic status, educational experience and expectations, familial capital, academic goals, personal interests, personality, and so much more! Accordingly, we should also recognize that any label, no matter how equitable we perceive it to be, will likely remain problematic in its inability to truly reflect the kaleidoscope of characteristics that makes up each individual.

So where are we now—as a field, as a community, as an organization? TESOL has moved toward the use of "MLL"—*multilingual language learner*—in place of ELL or EL in an effort to

recognize the assets, funds of knowledge, and linguistic capital of all individuals using English as an additional language. Will this label be embraced on a global scale? Will it have an impact on the ways in which learners are perceived? Will it stand the test of time? Will it be viewed as equitable and respectful by those to whom it refers? I suppose the optimist in me would say—maybe? This reflection is simply an invitation to be mindful of how we refer to MLLs and to engage in conversations with students and colleagues about labeling. What does the hive mind in your context think, and how will that impact language, policy, and action in your educational spaces?

In closing, I propose a few playful interpretations of well-known acronyms: ELLs = experts in language learning and EALs = experts in acquiring languages, and a few new ideas: EMLs = experts in multiple languages and MOLs = masters of languages. Perhaps a short lesson on acronyms with MLLs in your context will bring us to the next best label!

References

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