

Guidance for Administering the WI Early Literacy Screener in Spanish

Introduction

Literacy skills are critical to academic and life success. Developing these skills is a complex process that builds on oral language and involves mastering a continuum of early literacy skills. The purpose of assessing learners' reading skill development and requiring a reading plan and interventions, as legislated in Wisconsin Act 20, is to intervene as quickly as possible when a learner experiences challenges in acquiring early literacy skills essential to learning to read. Act 20 requires local education agencies to assess all students in grades 4K-3, including students classified as English Learners (ELs), using a DPI-selected early literacy screener that meets the requirements laid out in the law. Districts must use the results of the screener to determine which students are in need of further assessment and a personal reading plan.

Act 20 does not specify that the early literacy screener must be given in English. Students who are receiving, or have received, early literacy instruction in a language other than English may be assessed in the language of instruction, provided there is an assessment available that meets the specifications in the statute and is approved by DPI. In such cases, administering an approved literacy screener in a language other than English meets the Act 20 screening requirement. If no approved early literacy screener is available in the language of instruction, districts are required to administer the screener in English.

Currently, the DPI-approved early literacy screeners for 4K and K-3 are available only in English and Spanish. As such, multilingual learners,¹ including those identified as ELs, who speak languages other than Spanish must be screened in English at this time.² Even in cases when the early literacy screener must be administered in English, districts may also assess the literacy skills of multilingual learners in the other languages they speak. Assessing students in their home language(s) can provide educators with important information about students' literacy backgrounds and can help identify areas of strength on which to build. ELs and other multilingual learners bring a wealth of language and literacy experiences with them to school

¹ Although the terms are often used interchangeably, in this document we make a distinction between English Learners (ELs) and multilingual learners (MLs). When we use the term "English Learner" or "EL," we are referring to students who meet the federal definition of an EL and who are in the process of becoming proficient in English. We use the term "multilingual learners" to refer to a larger group of language learners, which includes ELs, simultaneous bilinguals, and English-speaking students in dual language programs who are learning a language other than English.

² EL students who speak languages other than Spanish but are enrolled in a Spanish/English Dual Language program may be assessed in Spanish if that is the language in which literacy is introduced.

that should be treated as assets that can be tapped into to support literacy development, no matter the language of instruction.

Deciding when to Administer the Early Literacy Screener in Spanish

Districts serving Spanish-speaking multilingual learners will need to decide when students will be screened in Spanish and when they will be screened in English for the purposes of meeting the requirements of Act 20. Districts may choose to screen students in both English and Spanish. However, only one score can be used to determine if a student is below the 25 percentile and is in need of further assessment and a personal reading plan. **The guidance in this document is meant to assist districts in deciding when the Spanish or English screener will be used to guide instruction and comply with Act 20 requirements related to screening, diagnostic assessment, and personal reading plans.**

DPI recognizes that assessing the literacy skills of Spanish-speaking multilingual learners in one language - either English or Spanish - does not provide a full picture of what those students know and can do across languages and may not capture the totality of their literacy knowledge. This is particularly true for students in bilingual or immersion programs who are being instructed in both languages. **While districts must choose to use either the Spanish or English screener to determine whether students qualify for a personal reading plan (PRP), districts are encouraged to assess students in both languages, when possible, and use that information to inform universal literacy instruction and determine the types of interventions students may need.** Administering the early literacy screener in both English and Spanish can also provide districts with a more complete understanding of students' literacy development that can be shared with families.

District Process for Selecting the Language of Assessment

Districts should develop a process or set of criteria for determining when the screener will be given in Spanish or English for the purposes of meeting the Act 20 screening requirement. The process should be established prior to administering the screener and should be applied consistently according to the set of criteria identified by the district. It is recommended that the process be included in the district's Early Literacy Remediation plan so that it is clearly documented and publicly shared.

Some of the factors districts may want to consider when developing a process for selecting the language in which the early literacy screener are outlined, below.

Primary Considerations for Determining the Language of Screening

There are two primary considerations that districts should take into account when determining the language in which students will be screened: the group for whom the screener was normed and access to literacy instruction in Spanish.

- **Group for whom the assessment was normed:** The state of Wisconsin has selected aimswebPlus as the approved early literacy screener in both English and Spanish. Per Pearson, the assessment vendor, the Spanish version of aimswebPlus was normed for students who are classified as English Learners (ELs) and whose primary language is Spanish. This means that the screener has been shown to be a reliable and valid measure for that group of children. Although districts may choose to use the Spanish language assessment with other students (i.e., simultaneous bilinguals or non-ELs enrolled in dual language or immersion programs), it may not be as valid or reliable an indicator of reading readiness as it is for the group for which it was normed.
- **Access to literacy instruction in Spanish:** It is recommended that the Spanish screener be given to meet the Act 20 screening requirement only if a student is receiving or has received literacy instruction in that language. Ideally, the screener should be a reflection of how well students are responding to instruction and whether additional support may be needed.

These two factors may not be the only ones districts use when determining if the students will be screened in English or Spanish. However, they can provide an important starting point for deciding whether it is more appropriate to screen in English or Spanish.

Further Considerations when Determining the Language of Screening:

In addition to the two primary considerations discussed above, there are a number of other factors that districts may want to consider when determining when students will be screened in English or Spanish to meet the requirements of Act 20. The following is a list of considerations districts may want to take into account:

- **ELP level:** If EL students are at the early stages of English proficiency, administering the screener in Spanish may better capture students' literacy development. As students become more proficient in English, it may make sense to give the screener in English to ensure sufficient attention is being paid to the transfer between Spanish and English literacy skills.

- **Grade level:** The extent to which students are expected to use Spanish and English in their classes may change as they progress through grades and may impact whether or not it makes sense to screen in English or Spanish. For example, in the upper elementary grades, students may be expected to use English more extensively and take mandated assessments in English.
- **Bilingual education program model:** Different bilingual program models take different approaches to literacy instruction in English and the partner language (i.e., Spanish) and may have different goals in terms of biliteracy development. When and if to give the assessment in Spanish may depend on whether or not students will be transitioning to mostly or all English instruction in future years or if they will have the opportunity to continue developing literacy in both languages.
- **Primary language of instruction:** If students are receiving 50% or more of their literacy instruction in one language (i.e., either Spanish or English), screening students in that language may provide important information about their literacy progress that can be used to inform instructional decisions.
- **Language in which literacy instruction was first introduced:** Screening students in the language in which literacy instruction was first introduced may provide important information about their existing literacy skills and identify strengths on which to build.
- **Length of time receiving literacy instruction in English:** If English literacy instruction has been only recently introduced to students, continuing to screen students in Spanish may provide a better picture of their overall literacy development. Alternatively, if students have received literacy instruction in English for several years, it may make sense to screen in English to determine the need for instructional changes or additional support in that language.
- **Length of time in U.S. schools:** A student who arrives in the U.S. in third grade may have different language and literacy skills in Spanish and English than another third grade student who has attended U.S. schools since kindergarten. If students are new to the U.S., administering the screener in Spanish may give the school important information about their prior literacy experiences and a better picture of their literacy development.
- **Classroom-based evidence indicating that screening the student in Spanish would give a more accurate picture of the student's literacy skills:** Districts may want to use other forms of assessment - such as classroom-based formative literacy assessments - to determine whether screening in Spanish would more accurately reflect their literacy development and need for literacy interventions.

- **Goals of instruction:** The language in which the screener is given should reflect the goals of the literacy instruction the student is receiving. If one of the languages is the focus of instruction, it may make more sense to give the screener in that language in order to provide information that can be used to guide instruction.

Screening in English

When developing a process for determining the language in which the early literacy screener will be given, it is important for districts to consider when and how often students will be screened in English. Even in programs where literacy instruction is introduced in Spanish, such as dual language programs, the ultimate goal is for students to become proficient readers in both Spanish and English. Research has shown that there is a correlation between strong literacy skills in Spanish and English³ and that students who develop literacy in two languages may become more proficient readers and writers than students learning to read only in one language.⁴ Once literacy instruction is introduced in English, districts should assess students' literacy skills in that language. Gathering assessment data in English helps educators understand how literacy skills developed in Spanish are transferring to English reading and writing and identify where additional instruction is needed. English language assessments may include the early literacy screener or other standardized assessments or classroom-based literacy assessments.

Many of the considerations listed above can be used to decide when to begin screening students in English, either in addition to the Spanish screener or as the main way of complying with Act 20. For example, ELP level, grade level, primary language of instruction, and length of time receiving literacy instruction in English are all important factors that may impact when districts decide to introduce or transition to screening in English. The fact that students will be assessed for reading proficiency in English on the third grade Forward exam is another important consideration, especially as students move up in the grade levels.

Screening Results: When a Personal Reading Plan Is Needed

Act 20 requires that a personal reading plan be developed for students scoring below the 25 percentile on the DPI-approved screener. If a student is given the required early reading screener only in English, that is the score that should be used to determine if they are in need of a personal reading plan. If the student is given the early reading assessment only in Spanish,

³ Kathy Escamilla, Susan Hopewell, Sandra Butvilofsky, Wendy Sparrow, Lucinda Soltero-Gonzalez, Olivia Ruiz-Figueroa, and Manuel Escamilla, *Biliteracy from the Start: Literacy Squared in Action*, Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing, 2014, 13-14.

⁴ Virginia P. Collier and Wayne P. Thomas, "Validating the Power of Bilingual Schooling: Thirty-Two Years of Large-Scale, Longitudinal Research," *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 37 (2017): 203-217.

that score should be used when deciding whether a personal reading plan is required. If the early literacy screener is administered in both English and Spanish, the district should have a process in place to identify which screener will be used to determine whether or not a personal reading plan is required. This decision should be made prior to administering the assessment and should be applied consistently according to the criteria the district has set.

Although only one screener score (i.e., either English or Spanish) can be used to determine if a student requires a personal reading plan, it is recommended that assessment data in both languages be used when developing the plan and determining the types of support the child will receive and the language(s) in which the support will be delivered. Considering data in both languages can also assist with planning for the transfer between Spanish and English literacy skills. Additional data to consider in developing a personal reading plan includes the diagnostic reading assessment, classroom data, and data from families or caregivers. Data from English Language Proficiency assessments, such as the ACCESS for ELLs, should also be considered. The information provided by these assessments can be used to develop appropriate literacy goals for the reading plan. This data can also inform the selection of literacy interventions that are aligned to students' needs, as well as the ongoing types of assessments that will be used to monitor student progress toward goals.

In all cases, districts should provide effective programming for multilingual learners, universal literacy instruction with linguistic supports, and targeted interventions, as needed. Students should also have access to grade-level appropriate, standards-aligned instruction that addresses both the state's English Language Arts (ELA) standards and English Language Development (ELD) standards.