**Overview**

Students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) are English learners (ELs) with little or, in some cases, no formal education, or whose education has been significantly interrupted.[[1]](#footnote-1) SLIFE bring a variety of strengths to learning, including the ability to navigate multiple cultures, and resilience skills resulting from experiencing [significant challenges](https://wida.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/resource/FocusOn-SLIFE.pdf) such as civil unrest, discrimination, lack of access to education, and the immigration process.[[2]](#footnote-2) They also face specific challenges related to the particularities of their schooling experience, such as [limited or no native language literacy](https://getsupported.net/serving-students-interrupted-formal-education-slife/) and [academic skills that are below grade level](https://wida.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/resource/FocusOn-SLIFE.pdf). To be successful, SLIFE need educators who can look beyond the label to identify their individual assets and provide effective instruction and supports that leverage strengths to address remaining linguistic, academic, and social-emotional needs.

**Who are SLIFE?**

SLIFE could be “refugees, migrant students, or any student who experienced limited or interrupted access to school for a variety of reasons, such as poverty, isolated geographic locales, limited transportation options, societal expectations for school attendance, a need to enter the workforce and contribute to the family income, natural disasters, war, or civil strife.”

*Source:* [*WIDA, 2015,p.1*](https://wida.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/resource/FocusOn-SLIFE.pdf)

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| **Potential Strengths and Common Challenges of SLIFE** | |
| **Strengths**   * Possess a wealth of life experience and extensive pragmatic knowledge * Can be very motivated to learn * Are adept at hands-on work * Collaborate well with others * Can learn at a rapid rate * May be fluent in multiple languages | **Challenges**   * Face significant time constraints to learn English, acquiring grade-level academic skills and knowledge, and preparing for standardized tests * May not be able to read or write in their home language * May have experienced immigration-related trauma * May possess cultural values that clash with those promoted in the U.S. schools * Face deficit-based educator mindset that views learning through an abstract, literacy-based lens |

**Strategies and Best Practices**

Successful instruction for SLIFE engages them in rigorous, challenging learning experiences through effective strategies and practices such as:

* **Asset-based teaching and learning approaches.** SLIFE benefit from [culturally responsive teaching approaches](https://www.brown.edu/academics/education-alliance/teaching-diverse-learners/strategies-0/culturally-responsive-teaching-0) that take into consideration their [assets](https://getsupported.net/serving-students-interrupted-formal-education-slife/). Schools can use intake assessments in students’ native languages, whenever possible, to identify the skills they already possess. Based on results, educators can consider targeted interventions, placement in specific courses that emphasize basic literacy and numeracy skills, and participation in special programming in addition to grade-level courses. At the classroom level, educators can incorporate native language support, hands-on tasks, scaffolds and supports to engage with complex text, and cooperative learning strategies.
* **School based SLIFE support teams.** This group of educators can engage in continuous conversations and monitoring of key processes such as SLIFE identification, targeted supports, instructional strategies, social and emotional needs and resources, and academic progress monitoring. In addition, the SLIFE team can communicate its findings to the rest of the school, to ensure SLIFE receive appropriate services that meet their complex needs. This team could include administrators, counselors, teachers working directly with SLIFE, as well as administrative staff trained to administer intake assessments.
* **Theme-based and interdisciplinary curriculum and assessment.** A [theme-based](https://www.colorincolorado.org/faq/how-do-i-implement-thematic-instruction) curriculum and assessment design exposes SLIFE to a set of literacy skills and concepts in context. This helps students connect new learning to what they already know, internalize learning, and use their newly gained knowledge and skills more effectively. This approach may emphasize theme-aligned essential questions, cross-curricular or interdisciplinary vocabulary, and [social emotional learning (SEL) competencies](https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CASEL-SEL-Framework-11.2020.pdf). If applied school-wide, a thematic curriculum and assessment design can also facilitate the transfer of skills and knowledge, allowing SLIFE to learn faster.
* **Highly structured instructional strategies.** Teachers can use instructional strategies that emphasize routines and task repetition in different contexts[[3]](#footnote-3) to reduce the cognitive load associated with learning new material. These strategies help SLIFE to focus on the academic concepts and skills presented, instead of dedicating significant learning time to learning how to complete new tasks. These strategies can be applied in all content areas with differentiated scaffolding to support both SLIFE as well as non-SLIFE peers.

**Sample Highly Structured Instructional Strategies**

* Think-Write-Pair-Shares
* [Turn-and-Talks](https://www.matsol.org/assets/Currents/MATSOL%20Currents%20Spring-Summer%202020k.pdf)
* [Adapted Writing with Colors](https://matsol.memberclicks.net/assets/documents/currents_v39n1_sping-summer%202016.pdf)
* [Close Reading Protocol](https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/close-reading-protocol)
* Discussions and [debate](https://ontesol.com/blog/how-to-teach-english/teaching-speaking/teaching-speaking-skills-debates-in-the-esl-classroom/)s
* [Socratic Seminar](https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/socratic-seminar)s
* **Project-Based Learning (PBL).** PBL provides opportunities to make learning meaningful for SLIFE, who benefit from activities they see as relevant to their lives.[[4]](#footnote-4) These types of projects can be thematically aligned to engage SLIFE in contextualized learning that supports effective language development and grade-level content learning. Many of the [Massachusetts ESL Model Curriculum Units (MCU)](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/instruction/mcu/) are aligned with PBL principles and can be successfully implemented with SLIFE using additional scaffolds and resources.

**Suggestions for Low, Middle and High-Incidence Districts**

**Educators serving SLIFE in low and mid-incidence districts can:**

* Offer literacy-based after-school programs for SLIFE to help them accelerate their learning towards meeting grade-level standards.
* Implement highly structured instructional strategies in all content areas, providing differentiated scaffolding for SLIFE.

**Educators serving SLIFE in high-incidence districts can:**

* Develop SLIFE programs with self-contained courses that provide focused instruction in basic literacy and numeracy skills in addition to grade-level content area instruction. These classes would offer SLIFE opportunities to learn academic routines and expectations in their new environment while giving them access to resources and scaffolds that they need to achieve academic success.
* Develop flexible schedules and closely monitor SLIFE progress to transition students out of literacy-focused courses as soon as students demonstrate mastery of core skills to maximize learning.

**Special Considerations: Supporting SLIFE’s Social and Emotional Learning**

Schools can support SLIFE in developing social and emotional competencies by:

* **Using a theme-based approach to SEL mirroring academics.** Schools can align [SEL competencies](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ouXhi_CfBVg) to school-wide [themes](https://www.episd.org/Page/4293) (identity, collaboration, responsibility, etc.) to facilitate student development. In practice, this purposeful integration would prioritize competencies aligned to a quarterly school theme that educators emphasize each quarter to ensure students have time to effectively learn and practice new skills.
* **Establishing a peer ambassador program.** This student-to-student mentoring can help SLIFE learn about school expectations and available resources. Peer ambassadors can offer SLIFE tips to successfully navigate the challenges of their new environment and help them get acquainted with the “non-written rules” of academic life.
* **Implementing** [**home visits**](https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/making-your-first-ell-home-visit-guide-classroom-teachers)**.** Educators can use home visits to build rapport with families, gain families’ trust and provide information about the inner workings of schools[[5]](#footnote-5). For example, visits can help schools can provide families with updates about SLIFE’s academic progress, with a particular focus on literacy and SEL skills. They can help families develop a better understanding of academic and literacy practices and increase their perception of support from educators and staff. Home visits can be implemented in many ways, including virtually via Zoom or other platforms.

**Actions-at-a-Glance**

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| **Actions for Classroom Educators** |
| * Develop and implement a theme-based approach to curriculum and assessment. * Implement highly structured instructional strategies across content areas (think-write-pair-shares, etc.). * Emphasize instructional routines and task repetition in different contexts. * Engage SLIFE in [cooperative learning](https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/cooperative-learning-strategies) that allows them to co-construct meaning with peers. * Combine oral interaction with reading and writing for a smooth transition to print-dependent environment. * Engage SLIFE in project-based learning that meaningfully connect school learning to students’ lives. * Purposefully integrate SEL competencies into theme-based curriculum and assessment. |

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| **Actions for School and District Leaders** |
| * Implement asset-based programs for SLIFE that provide access to rigorous, challenging instruction alongside with scaffolded supports inside and [outside the classroom](https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/how-support-ell-students-interrupted-formal-education-sifes#h-ten-ideas-for-providing-school-wide-support-to-students-with-interrupted-formal-education). * Create a school-level SLIFE team to continuously monitor SLIFE progress and follow up with interventions. * Establish a peer ambassador program to help SLIFE navigate the challenges of their new environment. * Organize school-wide events to showcase student work and invite families and community partners. * Provide educators and staff with targeted professional learning focused on SLIFE-specific strategies. * Create classes focused on developing SLIFE basic literacy and numeracy skills. * Start a home visit program to build rapport and support SEL alongside language and content learning. |

## **Instructional Planning Resources**

## **DESE Practical Tools and Resources**

[SLIFE Planning and Instructional Considerations Tool](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/slife/content/index.html#/lessons/0aGAm_3wi-0hdrd6sBPpsHc6rD_IldC3) provides teams high leverage topics to consider for supporting SLIFE and evaluating current SLIFE practices.

[ESL Model Curriculum Units](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/instruction/mcu/) allow educators access to high-quality curriculum units designed for English learners at various proficiency levels. These units can be implemented successfully with SLIFE, with some pacing modifications and additional supports for engaging with complex texts.

ESL Tools and Resources provides guidance for support effective ESL instruction including the Unit and Lesson Planning Thinking Processes and Templates.

**DESE Guidance**

[Culturally Responsive Teaching & Leading](https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/culturally-responsive/) provides resources that define cultural responsiveness and address its importance in our schools and classrooms, including professional development tools supporting culturally responsive teaching (such as the [Culturally Responsive Teaching Rubric](https://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/resources/calibration/crt-rubric.docx)), sample [look fors](https://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/resources/calibration/look-fors.docx), and a library of [classroom videos](https://www.doe.mass.edu/edeffectiveness/prof-learning/crt-videos/) showcasing culturally responsive instruction.

ESL Best Practices Quick Reference Guides provides guidance on a variety of key topics (formative assessment, racial equity and social justice, early literacy, etc.) as well as English learner student groups (students designated as long-term English learners, English learners with disabilities, etc.).

[Massachusetts Blueprint for English Learner Success](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/blueprint/blueprint.docx) and related [Blueprint for English Learner Success Quick Reference Guides](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/blueprint/dashboard.html) present essential conditions and actions educators can take to provide equitable experiences and outcomes for English learners.

[Massachusetts Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) Definition and Guidance](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/slife/) offers critical guidance for meeting the needs of SLIFE, including issues such as identification, guiding principles, planning and instruction, and reclassification.

Next Generation ESL Curriculum Resource Guide provides support for collaborative ESL curriculum development, including collaborative tools, processes, protocols, and resources used in the development of ESL MCUs.

**Federal Resources**

[Dear Colleague Letter: English Learner Students and Limited English Proficient Parents](https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-el-201501.pdf) provides guidance to assist state educational agencies, school districts, as well as public schools in meeting their legal obligations to support ELs.

[Newcomer Toolkit](https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oela/newcomers-toolkit/ncomertoolkit.pdf) assists educators in supporting and engaging their newcomers by offering tools, strategies, and practices effective with newcomer students and their families as well as professional learning activities for school staff. For a discussion of practices effective for SLIFE, see Chapter 2 (p. 11) and Chapter 3.

**Other Featured Resources**

[Focus on SLIFE: Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education](https://www.ride.ri.gov/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/OSCAS/English-Learner-Pages/EL-Toolkit/XI-Newcomer-WIDA-Focus-on-SLIFE-Final.pdf) discusses factors that influence SLIFE performance in schools and offers practical strategies for supporting them (p. 4-5).

[Gear Up for a New School Year!](https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/gear-new-school-year) provides back-to-school tips from teachers, including ideas for developing a Student Ambassador program.

[How to Support ELL Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFEs)](https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/how-support-ell-students-interrupted-formal-education-sifes) offers ideas for providing support to SLIFE at the classroom and school level.

[How to Serve Your Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE)](https://getsupported.net/serving-students-interrupted-formal-education-slife/) discusses strengths and challenges that SLIFE bring to U.S. classrooms as well as programming and instructional strategies for supporting them.

[Making Your First ELL Home Visit: A Guide for Classroom Teachers](https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/making-your-first-ell-home-visit-guide-classroom-teachers) provides practical tips for home visits to EL families.

[**For additional resources you may wish to consult, click here.**](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/esl-toolkit/tools-resources/)

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2. Wright, W. (2019). Foundations for Teaching English Language Learners: Research, Theory, Policy, and Practice, 3rd Ed. Pennsylvania: Caslon Publishing. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. DeCapua, A. (2019). SLIFE: What every teacher needs to know. University of Michigan Press; DeCapua, A. & Marshall, H. W. (2011). Breaking new ground: Teaching students with limited or interrupted formal education in US secondary schools. University of Michigan Press; Windle, J. A., & Miller, J. M. (2012). Approaches to teaching low literacy refugee-background students. Australian Journal of Language and Literacy, 35(3), 317 - 333. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cohan, A., & Honigsfeld, A. (2017). Students with interrupted formal education (SIFEs): Actionable practices. NABE Journal of Research and Practice, 8 (1), 166-175. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Henderson, A., Mapp, K., Johnson, V., Davies, J. (2007). [Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships](https://thenewpress.com/books/beyond-bake-sale). The New Press; Uy, P. (2018). Unpacking racial identities: the salience of ethnicity in Southeast Asian-American youth’s schooling experience. Race Ethnicity and Education, (21) 3, p. 407-421. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)