Bilingual Literacy for Learners with Intellectual Disabilities: An Intersectional Position

Loredana Muscat[1,2]
University of Malta[1] Institute for Education, Malta[2]
loredana.muscat@um.edu.mt

Abstract: Equitable literacy for learners with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) who are bilingual is often hindered by monolingual frameworks. This paper presents bilingual literacy as a right and a practical means to participation, rather than an optional addition. Using the Maltese context alongside international research, the paper compiles evidence on effective literacy practices for bilingual learners with ID. It reframes them through an intersectional perspective that acknowledges how disability, language, culture, and schooling systems should jointly create opportunities. The author translates this perspective into design principles for classroom practice and system leadership, highlighting common contextual difficulties, limited protected planning time, unclear language-of-instruction policies, and inconsistent preparation for bilingual, disability-responsive teaching. The author proposes solutions grounded in intersectional competence. In conclusion, a research agenda is proposed to test and expand intersectionally positioned biliteracy approaches.

Keywords: Individual Disability; biliteracy; intersectionality; inclusive literacy

Introduction and position statement

Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) experience early-onset neurodevelopmental deficits marked by significantly impaired intellectual and adaptive functioning. Difficulties in academic functioning typically accompany this. (Lee et al., 2023). Across bilingual and multilingual settings, individuals with ID are too often taught and assessed as if they were monolingual. This monolingual bias systematically sidelines the cultural and linguistic repertoires that shape how students access instruction and demonstrate knowledge (Beatty et al., 2021; García & Lin, 2017). An intersectional stance, in which

disability, language, and culture are viewed as mutually shaping dimensions of identity and opportunity, is crucial for helping students reach their full potential. The practical implication is to design biliteracy, disability, and/or literacy difficulty considerations into the curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and policy from the outset, rather than thinking of bilingual supports as an afterthought (Bešić, 2020; Wawire & Barnes-Story, 2023).

Malta's long-standing bilingual character, coupled with recent demographic shifts, has intensified linguistic diversity in mainstream classrooms and heightened the need for bilingual and multilingual teaching methods (Panzavecchia, 2024). Although Maltese and English remain the principal languages of instruction, many students bring additional languages, making cross-linguistic strategies, such as translanguaging and pedagogical code-switching, both common and pedagogically necessary (Faltis, 2019; Hopewell & Abril-Gonzalez, 2019), particularly in a context of bilingualism without diglossia. The inclusion landscape amplifies this imperative. Considering that in Malta, the vast majority of students with ID are educated in general classrooms, with over 94% in mainstream settings and only about 5.5% in specialised provisions (Eurydice, 2025), raises the question of whether and how bilingual and biliteracy practices are also applied to students with ID.

International frameworks reinforce the notion of bilingual education. UNESCO's Multilingual Education Roadmap (2025) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2013) call for instruction that values learners' home languages within literacy teaching. However, in practice, educators often struggle with the conflict between monolingual literacy programs and the multilingual realities of the classroom. A dilemma that can lead to an "English-only by default" approach, inadvertently marginalising Maltese and other home languages (Jessner & Allgäuer-Hackl, 2025; Muscat & Grech, 2023; Valdés, 2019).

The implications of this position paper are significant: when bilingual learners requiring cognitive support receive instruction solely in one language, it can hinder literacy development, reduce family involvement, and threaten cultural identity (Sefotho, 2019; Oshchepkova & Kartushina, 2023). Conversely, studies from Malta, Wales, Canada, and the United States demonstrate that structured dual-language instruction enhances decoding, vocabulary acquisition, and executive functioning in students with ID (Wawire & Barnes-Story, 2023;

García & Lin, 2017). Ultimately, bilingualism should be recognised as an educational asset rather than an obstacle, provided that teachers are equipped with effective, research-based strategies (Hopewell & Abril-Gonzalez, 2019; Moraczewska, 2024). This paper also attempts to move towards viewing individuals with ID as individuals with multiple layers of identity, as advocated by intersectional perspectives, rather than focusing on a single layer of needs and disability. Additionally, this paper aims to translate such evidence from intersectional theory and biliteracy studies in individuals with ID into actionable strategies, helping educators shift from feeling overwhelmed by linguistic diversity to successfully implementing inclusive biliteracy instruction.

An intersectional lens to literacy for students with Individual Educational Needs

Understanding literacy practices for bilingual learners with ID requires an intersectional approach, a framework that examines how multiple aspects of identity, such as race, disability, language, and culture, interact to shape learners' opportunities and challenges (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins & Bilge, 2020). This perspective highlights how routine actions, such as defaulting to the dominant school language or relying on monolingual assessments, can systematically advantage some students while disadvantaging others (Bešić, 2020; García & Lin, 2017; Beatty et al., 2021). Bešić (2020) argues that true inclusion extends beyond physical placement; it requires rethinking content, methods, structures, and strategies so that diversity becomes a driver of school improvement. Applied to biliteracy, this involves instruction in phonological and morphological awareness, decoding, vocabulary, comprehension, and written expression in both Maltese and English, thus positioning bilingualism as a strength rather than an obstacle (Hopewell & Abril-Gonzalez, 2019). Such an approach influences both curriculum design and organisational practices, including protected collaborative planning time between language and support specialists (Faltis, 2019; Wawire & Barnes-Story, 2023).

For this design to succeed, educators must work within conditions that provide the time, resources, and collaboration necessary for coherent implementation. Rerri (2022) found that educators supporting Spanish-speaking emergent bilinguals with ID face systemic barriers such as limited planning time, unclear language-of-instruction expectations, and fragile collaboration that depends on goodwill. These constraints weaken biliteracy instruction: fragmented planning hampers the

alignment of phonics and comprehension across languages, unclear policies sustain monolingual defaults, and ad hoc collaboration restricts the sharing of learner profiles and home literacy knowledge. The issue is not bilingualism itself, but organisational structures that fail to support coherent bilingual planning (Rerri, 2022; Moraczewska, 2024).

Informed leadership is crucial in addressing these barriers. Hernández Flores and Boveda (2024) define intersectional competence in leadership as the capacity to recognise systemic oppression and translate this understanding into actions around scheduling, supervision, and resource allocation. In literacy, this competence manifests when school leaders ensure co-planning among bilingual, specialised, and general educators, promote dual-language data discussions, and provide accessible, adapted materials in the languages students use (Hernández Flores & Boveda, 2024; Jessner & Allgäuer-Hackl, 2025). Without these leadership moves, efforts remain fragmented and vulnerable to staff turnover or policy drift.

Research shows that effective biliteracy practice requires multiple foci. Pedagogically, teaching should be explicit, cumulative, and scaffolded with multimodal tools that respect students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds while addressing the specific learning profiles linked to disability. An intersectional perspective highlights that these aspects — disability, language, and culture — are interconnected factors that shape how students access instruction and demonstrate achievement (Bešić, 2020; García & Lin, 2017). Organisationally, sustainable implementation depends on structural supports such as dedicated planning time, clear language-of-instruction policies, and equitable access to resources adapted across multiple languages, ensuring that no element of a learner's identity obstructs participation in literacy (Bešić, 2020; Faltis, 2019).

Biliteracy evidence-based strategies

While Malta offers valuable insights due to its linguistic diversity, this issue extends beyond its borders. Ward (2020) highlights a lack of clarity regarding children with ID in the UK's multilingual educational landscape. Research involving seven Welsh-English bilingual children with Down Syndrome (DS) showed that being bilingual does not negatively affect literacy outcomes compared to their typically developing peers. As policies often overlook the inclusion of students

with ID in multilingual practices, parents and educators remain cautious despite evidence supporting their potential success in bilingual contexts.

The connection between bilingualism and students with ID has often been viewed through a deficit perspective, which suggests that cognitive challenges hinder the development of bilingualism and biliteracy. Cioè-Peña (2020) notes that educators frequently believe bilingualism exceeds the cognitive abilities of children with disabilities, discouraging parents from enrolling their children in bilingual programmes. However, recent research is beginning to challenge this traditional view, emphasising the cognitive, social, and identity advantages that bilingualism can offer individuals with developmental disabilities. There is growing empirical evidence supporting the promotion of bilingualism, especially in groups where language development can vary considerably. For example, Silvestri and Falk (2023) demonstrate how Deaf and Deafblind students with multiple disabilities effectively communicate using American Sign Language, spoken language, and written text within a translanguaging framework. Their study highlights community-defined language practices and challenges language separation models, advocating for a multimodal multilingual approach to communication. Furthermore, Romero and Uddin (2021) show that bilingual children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) exhibit cognitive flexibility and inhibitory control benefits, suggesting that managing two languages may enhance executive functioning skills. Similar benefits have been recognised in literacy development.

Muscat (2024) contextualises changes in Malta's inclusive education system. Using insights from 102 stakeholders, including educators and school administrators, the author highlights obstacles such as inconsistent professional development, insufficient resources, and inflexible curricula. These conclusions advocate transitioning to well-established, inclusive bilingual practices, especially for students with complex learning needs. Muscat & Grech (2025) show that interventions focused on phonological awareness and visual memory lead to improved literacy results in both Maltese and English. The authors emphasise the need to create frameworks that accommodate a variety of communication styles and support the use of home languages, aligning with García and Kleifgen's (2019) advocacy for translanguaging pedagogies. Martínez-Álvarez (2018) further illustrates that students with disabilities can be multilingual meaning-makers when inclusive literacy instruction leverages their cultural and linguistic strengths. This approach transcends mere remedial measures and reframes

multilingualism as a path to empowering biliteracy learning. Muscat and Grech (2023, 2024) demonstrate that students with DS can engage in abstract phonological tasks across various languages when provided with structured instruction and dual-language support, challenging the notion that bilingualism causes cognitive overload. Their research, supported by global studies on cross-linguistic transfer in decoding and phonological awareness (Martin et al., 2021; Ward & Sanoudaki, 2020), highlights the importance of communicative richness and home literacy environments. Similarly, research by Yang (2023), Washburn et al. (2023), and Gilhuber (2023) shows that multilingual families improve literacy through storytelling and translanguaging. Yang's study on Chinese-Canadian families sheds light on the emotional motivations behind bilingual engagement, while Gilhuber concentrates on multimodal approaches. Moreover, Muscat & Grech (2024) found that children with DS who were exposed to dual-language print at home developed larger vocabularies and greater reading motivation, particularly when parents viewed bilingualism as an advantage, thereby fostering more enriching home literacy practices.

At the instructional level, challenges related to teacher preparedness remain significant. Common barriers educators report include insufficient assessment tools and misunderstandings between language delays and disabilities (Grande Gonzalez et al., 2024; Li, 2022; Swaby Shand, 2024). Interviews conducted by Li (2022) and Swaby Shand (2024) with educators in bilingual schools highlighted that many teachers received little training in linguistically inclusive assessment, often resorting to English-only methodologies. Multimodal techniques, such as augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) and symbolic supports such as Blissymbolics, have demonstrated effectiveness in clarifying language and promoting vocabulary development with bilingual individuals with intellectual disabilities (Frates et al., 2022, 2024; Larsson et al., 2025). A qualitative study by Larsson et al. (2025), which included interviews and observations of students and teachers in South Africa, revealed that integrating Blissymbolics with printed text enhanced reading comprehension and engagement in both languages.

Visual scaffolding strategies have proven highly effective in assisting bilingual learners with ID. Calvin and Gray (2022, 2024) utilised multiple-baseline single-case designs involving Spanish-English adolescents with learning disabilities, using double-bubble and funnel maps to enhance their understanding of expository and descriptive

texts. Participants regularly demonstrated improvements in both literal and inferential comprehension. Furthermore, Calvin and Gray (2022, 2024) indicated that the results obtained from monolingual groups apply to bilingual speakers with ID.

The growing research collectively shows a shift from remedial to responsive bilingual teaching. Instead of being a hurdle, bilingualism and multilingualism can help close literacy gaps, especially when combined with inclusive teaching methods, collaboration among educators, and family engagement. Research supports the feasibility of biliteracy for learners with ID and highlights it as a crucial part of fair and empowering literacy education. The following section offers recommendations for educators and policymakers, backed by relevant studies.

Implementing Intersectional Biliteracy

Based on empirical evidence and consistent with Maltese and international inclusion frameworks, the following strategies are proposed to enhance bilingual literacy instruction for learners with ID. These evidence-driven approaches recognise bilingual learners' cognitive and communicative strengths while highlighting the importance of multimodal, adaptable, and context-aware instruction. Figure 1 summarises each strategy, its empirical foundation, and key implementation considerations.

Implementing these strategies through an intersectional lens requires more than simply adopting new instructional techniques; it involves embedding them within structures that recognise how disability, language, culture, and socio-economic background interact to influence learning opportunities (Bešić, 2020; García & Lin, 2017; Collins & Bilge, 2020). This means designing literacy activities that draw on students' full linguistic repertoires, incorporating culturally relevant texts, and using assessment tools that are accessible in all languages of instruction (Hopewell & Abril-Gonzalez, 2019; Wawire & Barnes-Story, 2023). It also requires coordinated planning time for teachers, language specialists, and learning support educators to align instructional goals across languages, as well as leadership practices that actively address systemic inequities (Hernández Flores & Boveda, 2024). By integrating biliteracy practices within a broader commitment to equity and inclusion, schools can ensure that bi/multilingualism is treated as an instructional resource rather than a barrier, supporting learners with ID

to develop the skills and confidence necessary for full participation in both educational and community contexts.

Figure 1 *Strategies for Biliteracy for Students with ID*

Strategy	Evidence	Implementation Tips
Shared Dialogic Reading	Enhances vocabulary and comprehension in multilingual learners (Frates, 2022; Yang, 2023).	Use bilingual books and encourage caregiver narration in both languages.
Phonological Awareness in Both Languages	Cross-linguistic phonological training yields improvements in decoding and phoneme-grapheme mapping for bilingual learners with intellectual disabilities (Ward & Sanoudaki, 2021; Muscat & Grech, 2024).	Introduce phoneme games in both home and school languages, using visual aids and repetitive decoding routines. Syllabification games in both languages. Identification of sound in both languages.
Symbols+ Print	Combining Blissymbolics with orthography enhances comprehension and vocabulary in learners with learning disabilities (LD) (Larsson et al., 2024).	Pair symbols with key vocabulary words during instruction to reinforce meaning.
Technology-Based Storytelling	Digital storytelling supports engagement, expression, and literacy in multilingual learners (Cersosimo, 2023).	Implement bilingual digital storytelling tools or VR apps to encourage narrative development.
Inclusive Multilingual – Multimodal Environments	Inclusive environments that promote linguistic diversity enhance learner engagement (Panzavecchia, 2024). Multimodal and translanguaging approaches improve engagement and proficiency (Silvestri & Falk, 2023).	Display bilingual signage, encourage code-switching for learning, and foster a classroom culture valuing all languages. Use varied materials—technology in one language, books or games in another—enhanced by translanguaging.
Home-School Alignment	Home-school alignment increases vocabulary and motivation among multilingual learners (Muscat & Grech, 2024; Washburn et al., 2023).	Encourage families to engage in bilingual routines and label environments in both languages.
Educator Professional Development	Ongoing training in inclusive bilingual literacy and AAC pedagogy supports educator effectiveness (Muscat, 2024).	Mandate continuous training and provide workshops with classroom implementation strategies.

Assessment and Progress Monitoring

Assessment choices shape not only how educational progress is defined, but also how progress is recognised. Within current legal frameworks, the Individualised Education Plan (IEP) remains the primary tool for tracking growth for students with ID. However, policy analyses reveal a persistent disconnect between recommended instructional practices and the formal mechanisms for monitoring achievement (Muscat 2025, *pre-print*). This disconnect is particularly consequential for bilingual learners with ID, whose progress is often assessed separately in each language, with little recognition of cross-linguistic transfer or how home language use supports school-based learning.

An intersectional approach to assessment recognises that disability, language, culture, and family engagement intersect to influence both learning opportunities and outcomes. Effective monitoring, therefore, requires repeated, domain-specific indicators in both languages, alongside systematic documentation of the language used for instruction and assessment. This not only reflects authentic learning conditions but also provides a transparent, evidence-based foundation for decision-making (Zirkel & Yell, 2024). Importantly, IEPs should explicitly track bilingual development, record instances of translanguaging, and integrate culturally relevant texts that align with learners' identities (Bešić, 2020; Hernández Flores & Boveda, 2024).

Family involvement must be ongoing rather than limited to post-report meetings; continuous collaboration ensures that assessment reflects the learner's full communicative repertoire, including literacy practices at home. Expectations for progress should be matched to both the cognitive profile and linguistic resources of the learner, supported by multimodal strategies, and evaluated through repeated, dual-language measures that capture growth across contexts (Wawire & Barnes-Story, 2023).

Systemic Conditions for Sustainable Practice

Systemic alignment is essential. Embedding biliteracy practices for learners with ID within curriculum and assessment frameworks indicates a shift from viewing such learners as exceptions to recognising them as expected participants in bilingual inclusive education. However, for these frameworks to be meaningful, they must be accompanied by the material conditions necessary for implementation. These include protected planning time, parity of instructional resources across languages, including symbol-supported and digital materials, ongoing mentoring and supervision to build intersectional competence, and explicit language-of-instruction policies that guard against default monolingualism (Hernández Flores & Boveda, 2024; Rerri, 2022).

Educators require not only policy guidance to support bilingual decision-making in the classroom but also immediate access to high-quality, adaptable materials in all relevant languages. Biliteracy tools such as scaffolded readers, phonics resources, and assessment templates should be readily available "off the shelf" to ensure timely, efficient, and sustainable implementation for both educators and learners.

An Intersectional Biliteracy Agenda for Learners with ID

Growing evidence shows that bilingual literacy benefits learners with ID, which requires a decisive shift from monolingual traditions to linguistically adaptive policies. Initiatives in Malta exemplify both progress and areas for improvement. The National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo (2021-2030) encourages daily reading in both Maltese and English, while the revised National Inclusion Policy (2022) reaffirms commitments to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. However, neither document explains how to implement bilingual literacy for students with cognitive diversity. As a result, school leaders and teachers face uncertainty, inconsistent practices, and persistent deficit assumptions (Muscat, 2024; Grande Gonzalez et al., 2024). European guidance is broader but remains unclear: the 2019 Council Recommendation on Languages calls for proficiency in two additional languages, and the European Pillar of Social Rights promotes inclusive education, but both lack specifics on disability sensitivity. To bridge the gap between policy and practice, six targeted actions are proposed,

1. *Enact a national bilingual literacy framework for all learners.*

Establish the role of all languages as means of instruction; integrate dual-language objectives into curriculum, assessment, and teacher standards. Research by Muscat and Grech (2023, 2024) indicates that organised bilingual programs promote cross-linguistic transfer, highlighting the necessity for widespread implementation across systems. Specific guidelines that include learners of all abilities should be outlined in policy, as both inclusion and literacy policies currently provide fragmented, generic guidelines.

2. *Embed compulsory professional development in bilingual inclusion.*

Preparation and continuous professional development should encompass multimodal literacy, cross-linguistic scaffolding, translanguaging, and the use of AAC. Training must follow a cyclic format, including induction, refresher courses, and quality assurance, enabling educators to build and sustain their confidence.

3. Implement bilingual assessments for all.

Replace monolingual assessments with dynamic, dual-language measures of phonology, memory, and reading; track learning potential rather than deficits. Speech-language pathologists, literacy specialists and psychologists should encourage the use of such tools to prevent mislabelling bilingual growth as a delay.

4. Allow adjustments in curriculum and ensure equal access to resources.

Literacy instruction for bilingual learners with ID frequently encounters resource-related barriers. In Maltese classrooms, the limited availability of Maltese-language literacy software often leads educators to rely on English-based platforms. These digital tools can offer structured, phonics-based guidance that strengthens decoding and phonological awareness. This is particularly valuable for Learning Support Educators (LSEs) without specialised literacy training, as such software provides evidence-based instructional sequences (Muscat, 2024). However, reliance on English alone risks marginalising students' first or preferred home languages. To foster vocabulary development and conceptual understanding across languages, educators should supplement English resources with materials in Maltese and other home languages, drawing on research supporting cross-linguistic transfer (Muscat & Grech, 2025). A dynamic bilingual pedagogy must also include strategies such as code-switching, adult mediation, and materials tailored to learners' cognitive profiles. Graphic organisers, visual-symbolic supports, and AI-enhanced platforms, offered in both languages, can significantly enhance access and engagement (Calvin & Gray, 2022, 2024). National guidelines should classify these tools as essential infrastructure rather than optional extras, ensuring that literacy programmes are adaptable and inclusive of minority languages.

5. Establish structured assistance for home-school literacy collaborations.

Policies should promote culturally relevant resources and workshops that support families in maintaining dual-language storytelling, dialogic reading, and print routines, which are associated with richer vocabulary and greater motivation in bilingual children with ID (Muscat & Grech, 2024). Incorporating translanguaging and home literacy practices boosts

vocabulary and engagement. Leaders with intersectional competence can facilitate this process by providing bilingual communication tools, culturally sensitive workshops, and encouraging two-way literacy sharing between home and school (Hernández Flores & Boveda, 2024; Rerri, 2022; Valdés, 2019). As Bešić (2020) notes, such practices transform diversity from a reactive issue into a core value of inclusive literacy.

6. *Enhance Bilingual Research in ID.*

Although research on bilingual instruction for learners with ID is slowly gaining ground, further empirical studies remain crucial. Current evidence supports the use of multilingual, multimodal, and culturally responsive methods, moving beyond traditional models that often overlook the cognitive and linguistic strengths of these learners. To guide such practices, data should be systematically gathered and categorised by language backgrounds, disability profiles, and literacy outcomes. This enables more equitable resource distribution, reveals disparities, and facilitates the continuous refinement of policies. Future research should explore the long-term academic and social effects of dual-language instruction, with a focus on learner agency, identity, and self-expression. Longitudinal studies with inclusive assessment tools are essential for monitoring progress across multiple languages and settings. Furthermore, additional research is needed on the role of bilingual AAC systems in both classroom and home environments.

Conclusion

An intersectional perspective shows how culture, ability, and language are often marginalised in literacy education for learners with ID. The recommendations provided here are not exhaustive, but they offer meaningful guidance for policy and practice based on current research. Building biliteracy from the beginning, through clear, multimodal instruction; bilingual assessments aligned with teaching; and leadership rooted in intersectional competence, positions bilingualism as a vital educational asset. The Maltese context, when viewed alongside international evidence, demonstrates the feasibility of this approach and emphasises the structural conditions needed for its long-term sustainability.

In multilingual settings, decisions about which language to prioritise in instruction have tangible impacts on learners with ID. Students with an ID often already face cognitive, communicative, and learning challenges;

removing one language of literacy instruction, often their home or community language, can significantly limit access to learning and expression. Such choices reduce opportunities for communication, hinder participation, and risk undermining students' future independence. If the aim is to prepare learners to function confidently within bilingual communities, then restricting their linguistic tools is not just limiting; it is actively disabling. Inclusive literacy must therefore recognise bilingualism as a right and a necessity, seeing it as central to equitable and meaningful education.

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