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UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

FOCUS BULLETIN

February 2024

Expanding Reading Instruction with Multilingual Learners

Introduction

Across the WIDA Consortium, educators are invested in improving reading ability for all their students. Research shows that the cognitive processes involved in learning to read are the same for everyone, but that students learning to read for the first time in an unfamiliar language need explicit, additional attention to some factors (Goldenberg, 2020). Many of the literacy programs and approaches currently being used or promoted do not take into account the unique needs and assets of multilingual learners.

> "…the vast majority [of Emergent Bilinguals] enter into a literacy education that is designed and delivered for monolingual English speakers. This delivery ignores the reality that Emergent Bilinguals already have a language and doesn't address the ways of processing language and learning related to second language development and their dual language brains" (Escamilla, Olsen, & Slavick, 2022, p. 7).

Reading instruction needs to be expanded to foreground and effectively use the strengths multilingual learners bring to their reading development. This Focus Bulletin highlights four important additions to reading instruction and shares examples from classrooms where educators are expanding their reading instruction to be more inclusive and effective for multilingual learners.

Four educators from different parts of the United States have partnered with WIDA to explore inclusive reading practices for multilingual learners. These educators have expanded reading instruction for multilingual learners in four important ways.

Meet the Educators

Angela Mortenson is a bilingual Spanish-English kindergarten teacher in a dual language school in Wisconsin. With over 20 years of experience with several reading programs, she has found that none of them has everything that's needed. Because Angie knows that students need to make connections between reading and their own lives, she works with them to make books about their favorite activities, complete with photos of themselves engaged in those activities.

Michelle Alba teaches fourth grade in an urban school district in Utah and has many multilingual students in her classroom. A monolingual English speaker, Michelle consistently shows her respect for multilingualism and her interest in students' languages and actively supports translanguaging among the students in her classroom. Recognizing the foundational importance of oral interaction to reading comprehension, Michelle provides multiple opportunities for extended sensemaking conversations among her students.

Alonso Jaque-Pino teaches newcomer students in a middle school in Minnesota. As a bilingual educator, he often uses Spanish-English translanguaging in his classroom, and also elicits information and examples from his students' other languages. Alonso is a strong advocate for his students and speaks often about the importance and value of multilingualism and his own pride in being multilingual.

Emily Francis is a North Carolina educator teaching English as a second language to newcomers in high school. She is bilingual in Spanish and English and has written a book called *If You Only Knew* about her experience emigrating to the United States from Guatemala as a teenager. She draws on her experience to connect with her students' lives and rich backgrounds. She knows that her students need extensive opportunities to talk and listen to one another, and plans content-related activities that require group communication and collaboration.

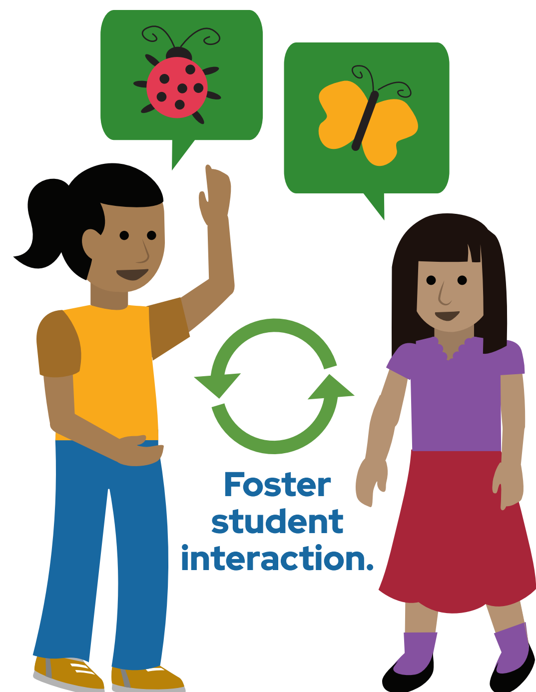
Learn About and Connect to Students' Lived Experience

Students draw on their background knowledge and experiences to make sense of new texts. Activating students' existing knowledge benefits students' reading comprehension at all stages—before, during, and after reading (Hattan et al., 2023). When the teacher and students share a background, it can be easier to draw on prior knowledge, because they share understanding of their experiences. However, when educators do not have the same experiences as their multilingual learners, it requires more effort to discover what students know and can do. Emily Francis relates to being frustrated as a high school student when her teachers seemed not to understand how much she knew—about the topic, about public speaking, about critical thinking—even though she could not yet express it in English. Watch this video clip to hear about Emily's experience. Even if students cannot yet communicate their background knowledge in English, it is critical that we tap into and build on what students know, regardless of their language proficiency. Two methods can connect students' existing knowledge with classroom texts. One is to plan classroom activities that build knowledge related to the text. The other is to choose texts and resources that connect to the background students already have.

> "Readers who are rarely provided with opportunities to read texts that reflect their cultural background will experience the reading process differently than those with the privilege of a frequent match of their cultural background and the knowledge assumed by an author/text" (Duke and Cartwright, 2021, p. S28).

It is important to consider that every text choice privileges certain background knowledge, and that all students deserve and benefit from opportunities to read texts for which they have strong background knowledge.

Learning about and connecting texts to multilingual learners' lived experiences is a powerful way not only to create strong bridges for literacy learning, but also to demonstrate to students the value of their existing knowledge and how academic content connects to their lives.



Edith Nava, WIDA Professional Learning Specialist, shares her views about how important it is for children to see themselves in what they read. Read her ideas or watch the video here. "So within school spaces, Spanish was not valued and the books didn't accurately reflect me, and I didn't see myself or my stories. So as my kids have begun their journey in school spaces, that's an important piece that I want to make sure is present for them, that they do see themselves and they can see themselves as authors, as well as illustrators, and see themselves in the books that they're reading, and stories that they can relate to. … I know that as a parent, I find myself often needing to supplement what it is that they're reading because it's so important to me that they can see themselves in the books that they read."

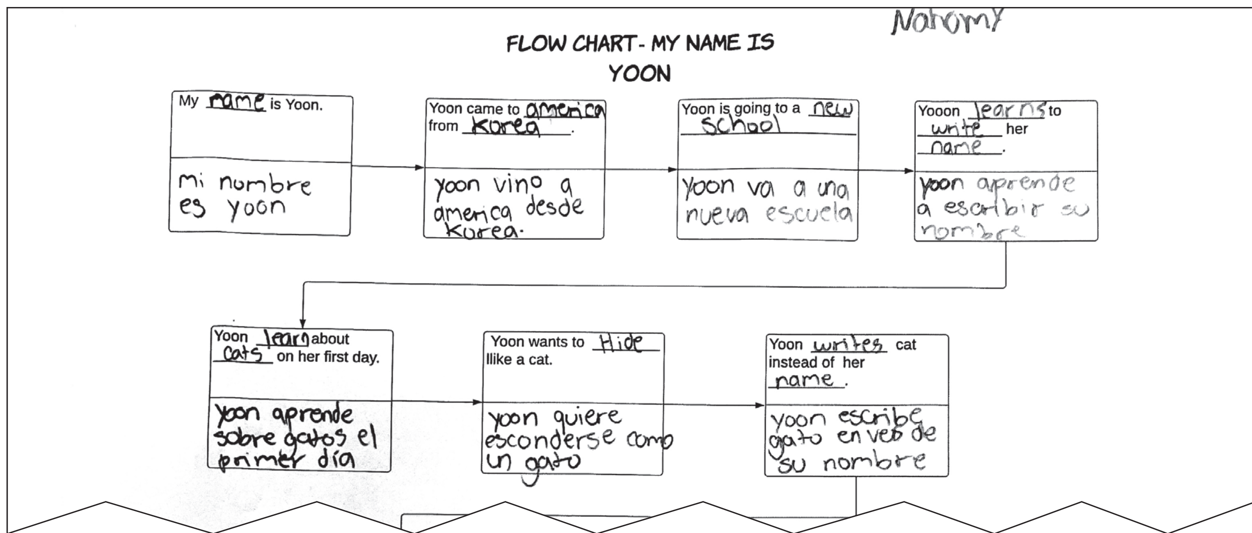
Learn About and Connect to Students' Languages and Knowledge About Languages

Publishers often provide lists of vocabulary words with student texts. While it's true that readers may need to recognize new words when making sense of a text, we should think about which of these words students might already know in their own languages. Building on what is already known can not only be faster than starting from scratch, but also demonstrates understanding and respect for students' vast knowledge of and about words in their other languages. Alonso, while translanguaging with his Spanish-speaking students, frequently asks his multilingual students, "What is your word for this? How do you say this?" By having students offer translations in the languages they speak, by identifying cognates, and having students talk about what they already know about parts of the word, Alonso boosts his students' linguistic confidence and instills the idea that their knowledge of words is an important strength they can rely on (Martínez, 2018).

> We are often in such a hurry to expand [multilingual learners'] linguistic repertoires—to give them more words, for example—that we do not bother to notice what is already there…. lexical knowledge, or knowledge of words, is actually an area in which many of these students excel. In fact, some of these students know words in multiple languages (Martínez, 2018, p. 519-520).

Alonso makes space in discussions and on student worksheets for students' languages to exist side-by-side. Worksheets have ample space for students to express and explore ideas in their most familiar language before translating to English, such as this Spanish-speaking student's worksheet about a story the class was reading. Alonso's students use iPads with translation programs to help them navigate sensemaking activities across their languages.

The image on the next page shows a portion of a worksheet from Alonso's classroom. Nahomy is taking notes on a story about a Korean girl named Yoon. You can see how Nahomy uses both English and Spanish in her work.



During oral discussions, Alonso makes a point of not rushing to correct his students' words or replace them with their more correct or exact English counterparts. Instead, he uses those new English words or phrases in his responses, trusting that students will try them out and adopt them when they are ready. He wants his students to know that their words are good enough to be understood, and that they can start to use English "on their own terms."

Alonso's approach is consistent with research on content learning for multilingual learners, which notes that focusing too early on academic vocabulary "means that teachers might miss out on understanding what students are actually thinking" (Bunch & Martin, 2021, p. 3). By delaying his focus on linguistic correctness and making ample time to hear and explore his students' ideas, Alonso supports his students' engagement in content learning, and demonstrates that, with whatever combinations of their languages they choose to employ, their ideas matter and they are active and valued contributors to classroom discussions.

Sam Macias is a multilingual speaker and pre-service teacher at the University of Wisconsin. "As an individual who kind of had the burden on myself and thought that my Spanish speaking background was the barrier to why I was so slow a reader, I want to really focus on this with the students, because I do not want them to feel this way. You know, as they're going through their education, I don't want them to feel that their cultural background is a burden, but instead, I want to celebrate this and I want to let them know that it's part of their identity. And that, you know, it's a skill. You know, them being able to speak a different language or them having a different cultural background should be celebrated."

Prioritize Oral Language Development (Speaking and Listening)

Reading comprehension begins long before students are even exposed to printed words (Burkins & Yates, 2021). Reading comprehension is a multistep process of turning printed symbols into the sounds they represent—or, for deaf children, into the motions of sign language (Goldin-Meadow & Mayberry, 2001)—and then connecting those sounds (or signs) with the thing or idea they represent. Connecting that sequence of sounds or motions to the thing itself requires having had multiple experiences that connect those sounds/hand motions with what they represent.

As an example, the English word *cat* may be a simple one to sound out, but someone who has never seen a cat will not be able to comprehend the word, even though they might be able to pronounce it perfectly. The meaning of the word *cat* is not in the word itself, but in the internal knowledge of what a *cat* is. Once that understanding exists, first the sounds of cat and, later, the letters of *cat* begin to signify the internal knowledge of *cat*.

"Listening comprehension…the capacity to understand spoken language…develops through conversation, through hearing and sharing personal stories, and through interactions with rich texts" (Burkins & Yates, 2021, p. 11).

Students who grow up surrounded by English have had thousands of experiences connecting certain sequences of sounds to actual things or ideas in the world around them. For students who can already comprehend spoken words, learning to read is learning a new use of a known language: how its sounds are mapped to print (Seidenberg & Borkenhagan, 2020). For these students, listening comprehension has been an important foundation stone of their reading comprehension.

For multilingual learners, those sequences of English sounds may not signify a connection to anything. Using the example from above, Spanish-speaking students may well understand the idea of *cat* when expressed as *el gato*, but the English sounds of *cat* may be meaningless—until some experience connects *cat* to *el gato.*

Hence listening comprehension is critical to reading comprehension. If students do not comprehend a spoken English word, they will not comprehend that printed word, even if they decode it perfectly into sound. In fact, research tells us that by the eighth grade, nearly all of the differences in reading comprehension levels stem not from differences in decoding, but from differences in listening comprehension (Burkins & Yates, 2021).

The listening comprehension of students who grew up interacting in English is already well developed, and their learning task is to map sound onto print. But for students who did not grow up interacting in English, listening comprehension and reading comprehension need to be developed simultaneously. Students learning to read in English, while also learning English words, need to be immersed in multiple authentic experiences that connect spoken English words to the things and ideas they represent. Although we

often talk about what a word means, we need to remember that meaning is not found exclusively in words but emerges as students engage with language in context (Gibbons, 2006). Children learn most of the thousands of words they need to know implicitly, through meaningful interaction with others (Seidenberg & Borkenhagen, 2020).

What does it look like to focus on oral language development during reading instruction? In Michelle Alba's fourth-grade classroom, students are often instructed to stop and talk, to brainstorm ideas about a topic, or share what they know, or to make and justify a prediction about what will happen. Importantly, Michelle does not position these conversations as student–teacher interactions, but asks her students to generate ideas in a small group. She skillfully extends these conversations by asking open-ended questions, such as "Can anyone talk about how that relates to what we said yesterday? ... How does that idea compare to what you were thinking?" Additionally, Michelle supports her students' skills in listening comprehension by asking her students to report what they heard their partners say. Activities like these recycle the language of the text and provide students with important practice in using language to interact with ideas and with one another.

Similarly, when Emily Francis works with her newcomer students, she surrounds the reading of a new text with hands-on, small group activities that involve students in producing something together. The photo at right shows a presentation slide and a model of a poison dart frog that her students made as they read a series of short science articles. By having students produce something as part of a group, Emily set in motion many opportunities for students to use both English and translanguaging to understand the ideas presented in the text, and to then collaboratively create posters and models to show their understanding. The frequent recycling of language during these meaning-making activities provides critical opportunities for both implicit and explicit word learning.

Strengthen Word Knowledge

Multilingual students come to school with a deep knowledge of many things, including words and language. This fact may be surprising to educators familiar with the persistent deficit-based myth of the "word gap"—the narrative that asserts that certain groups of children know fewer words than others. The research that gave rise to the term "word gap," conducted in 1995, analyzed the discourse patterns and practices common to only white middle-class families in the U.S. (Wang et al, 2021). The research did not explore the multiple other ways children learn language in the many additional communities represented

in today's classrooms.

Contemporary scholars of education for multilingual learners recognize that multilingual learners have a rich array of vocabulary across multiple languages (Martinez, 2018). This strong foundational knowledge of and about words can be activated to strengthen their knowledge about English words.

Maya Martinez-Hart, a WIDA Professional Learning Specialist, shares her view of the importance of working across the full range of students' languages. "As students engage in listening, reading, and viewing tasks, they are making meaning using their dynamic bilingualism, regardless of the language of input."

When educators build on pre-existing word knowledge, in any language, new words "stick" in learners minds. Some effective ways to build on students' bilingual foundation include identifying cognates, and focusing on new words as they occur in a meaningful context of activities and discussions.

Using Cognates

For multilingual learners, word knowledge develops in a dynamic and fluid way, and not along some imagined continuum from easy, everyday words to formal, academic words. Using cognates can harness this dynamic nature of language development. Cognates are words that look or sound similar in two languages, such as *continue* and *continuar*. Spanish has many cognates for words that are often considered academic in English, due to shared Latin word roots. Because the influence of Latin is stronger in Spanish than it is in English, words that might be considered specialized or advanced in English may very well be common, everyday words in Spanish (Martínez, 2018). *Edifice*, in English, can be considered an advanced synonym for the everyday word *building*. In Spanish, however, *edificio* is the common, everyday word for *building*. It is important to view with caution lessons that categorize words into tiers of difficulty, since the boundary lines between those tiers disappear when students speak multiple languages. By analyzing cognates, students make connections to the word roots, prefixes, and suffixes that help them understand additional English words.

Embedding Words in the Context of Meaningful Activities

Children learn most words implicitly, through frequent and meaningful oral interaction with others, but explicit instruction about words is also necessary (Burkins & Yates, 2021; Lesaux, 2007). Instruction about words can either be integrated in the moment (e.g., "Do you remember where we've seen that word root before? Who remembers what that word ending means?") or as stand-alone word exploration activities. However, multilingual learners should not experience new words for the first time as part of a decontextualized word list (Gibbons, 2006; Molle et al, 2021; Webb, 2019).

It's important to be cautious about pre-teaching new words. Instead, it can be helpful to note where students will encounter unfamiliar words in context, and to pause in those moments to explore what students might know or figure out about the word.

> "Preteaching vocabulary often introduces words out of context. This impedes learning because it prevents students from making connections between the new words, other words in the text (oral or written), and background knowledge they might have" (Molle et al, 2020, p. e616, citing Webb, 2019).

> "Preteaching vocabulary perpetuates the belief that meaning is found exclusively in words. It is not; meaning emerges as students engage with language in context" (Molle et al, 2020, p. e616, citing Gibbons, 2006).

Here is a video clip of Michelle embedding explicit word instruction into a lesson on Mesoamerica. In the lesson shown in the video, Michelle engages her students in a choral reading of the sentence containing the perhaps unfamiliar word *civilization*. She connects the word root *civil* with the words *civic* and *city* and tells a story about her father's work as a civil engineer. Together, students create a definition of *civilization*, and Michelle asks what word or words represent that idea in other languages. Students go on to create related hand motions to help them remember its meaning. By exploring the word in its context and in other languages, and adding discussion and hand motions, Michelle helps her students develop a robust understanding of the word and of the ideas it represents. By co-creating hand motions, Michelle engages students' multiple senses to help them connect with and remember the word's meaning. Embedding explicit instruction right into the context of the word's use can help multilingual learners use both contextual and morphological clues to develop their meaning of the word and to make connections to similar words they know in their languages.

Conclusion

Every multilingual learner enters the classroom with their own unique set of literacy skills and background knowledge. Recognizing and integrating these diverse assets into literacy lessons demonstrates to students that you view them as readers and that they are valued members of the classroom community. On the following pages you can find activities and reflection questions to support you as you enact these critical expansions. These ways of expanding reading instruction can make reading instruction more inclusive and effective for multilingual learners.

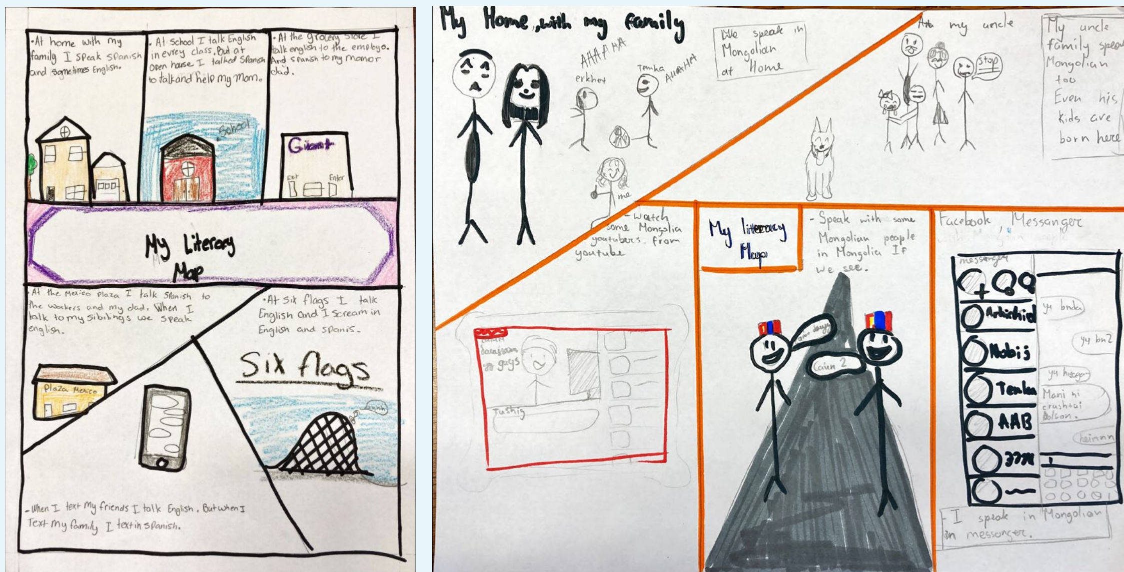
Reflection Tool

Expansion	Reflection Question	Suggested Activities
Learn about and connect to students' experiences	How do I discover my students' varied lived experiences, prior academic experiences, and background knowledge in an authentic way? Where in my lesson can I include scaffolded opportunities for all students to share what they know and have experienced about a topic?	• Community literacy maps (see p. 12) • Empathy interviews (see p. 13) • Family engagement • Translation tools • Creating a model or visual • Discussion using home languages
Learn about and connect to students' language and knowledge about language	How am I demonstrating that I value all the languages spoken by students in my classroom? How can I support my students in exploring connections among the languages spoken in our classroom?	• Create opportunities for students to teach and learn words in languages spoken by students in the classroom • Provide bilingual texts or texts written in students' home languages • Find a space to write or post audio of key words in languages my students speak • Explore roots and morphemes and discuss how these do/do not show up in other languages • Compare and contrast ways of using certain words in different languages

Expansion	**Reflection Question**	**Suggested Activities**
Prioritize oral language development	How can I actively support translanguaging opportunities? How can I enable all students to actively participate in extended academic discussions?	• Model translanguaging or find models of translanguaging • Use discourse moves to facilitate extended sense-making conversations among students. See the WIDA Focus Bulletin for more information.
Strengthen word knowledge	How can I provide my students with experiences that connect words to their meaning? How can I structure my lesson so that I introduce and discuss new words in the context in which students encounter them, rather than pre-teaching them?	• Use models, visuals, or technology to provide experiences • Allow students time to grapple for understanding. See the Doing and Talking Math and Science website for more information. • Explore author's word choice and the effect of word choice • Explore cognates and relationships between words across languages

Community Literacy Maps

To learn about students' experiences with reading, educators can create a community literacy map, either with an entire class or individual students. It begins with a conversation about a broader view of literacy as part of students' daily lives and enables the teacher to learn about their students' everyday language experiences outside of the school walls. Here are two examples of community literacy maps made by students of educators Beckie Gladfelter and Allison Saul, Middle School ELL teachers in Maryland.



"We found this activity valuable, as it encouraged students to reflect upon their use of home language versus English throughout their day. We appreciated the fact that students engaged in metacognitive thinking about their language usage, which doesn't happen frequently. This heightened their awareness and fostered a powerful classroom discussion."

Empathy Interviews

The purpose of this empathy interview is to gain insight into a particular student's perspective and experience with reading. This one-on-one conversation is an opportunity to engage in deep listening to students' stories and their truths so that educators and students can engage together to envision more inclusive learning spaces.

- Listen with an open mind while checking your own biases
- Observe tone, emotions, and body language
- Ask open-ended questions to explore the students' ideas (Can you tell me more?)
- Provide translation resources where needed (translator tool, interpreter, etc.)

Write a few questions that promote student storytelling focused on their experiences with reading and reading instruction. Craft questions that position you to listen more than you talk. Here are a few examples:

- What do teachers do that helps you with your reading?
- What makes you like or dislike reading (in any language)? Why?
- How does the teacher value the knowledge and experiences you bring to school? How could this be improved?

Question	Notes

To reflect, highlight key words or ideas from your notes. Then, respond to these questions:

- What did this reveal to you? about your student's needs? learning experiences?
- What steps or actions might you take next?

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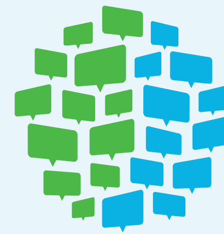

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WIDA Authors
Hetal Ascher
Rita MacDonald

Contributors
Michelle Alba
Emily Francis
Beckie Gladfelter
Alonso Jaque-Pino
Sam Macias
Maya Martinez- Hart
Angela Mortenson
Edith Nava
Allison Saul

WIDA Focus Bulletin Staff
Rebecca Holmes, Editor
Jay Lema, Editor
Janet Trembley, Graphic Design

Wisconsin Center for Education Research
University of Wisconsin-Madison
1025 West Johnson St., Madison, WI 53706

Client Services Center
Toll free: 866.276.7735
help@wida.us

wida.wisc.edu