



English Language Learners: Literacy and Language Development

Becoming literate in a second language depends on the quality of teaching, intensity/thoroughness of instruction, methods used to support the special language needs of second-language learners, how well learning is monitored, and teacher preparation.

Explicit instruction that provides substantial coverage in the key components of reading - **phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension** - has clear benefits for language-minority students. Adjustments to these approaches are needed to have maximum benefit with English language learners.

Word-level skills in literacy - such as decoding, word recognition and spelling - are often taught well enough to allow language-minority students to attain levels of performance close to those of native English speakers. However, this is not the case for **text-level skills** - reading comprehension and writing. Language-minority students struggle to approach the same levels of academic language proficiency in text-level skills achieved by native English speakers. Specifically, English vocabulary knowledge, the ability to provide definitions of words, sentence/phrase structure skills, and listening comprehension, are linked to English reading and writing proficiency. These findings help explain why many language-minority students can keep pace with their native English-speaking peers when the instructional focus is on word-level skills, but lag behind when the instructional focus turns to reading comprehension and writing.

The report of the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth states that instruction in the key components of reading is necessary - but not sufficient - for teaching ELLs (English Language Learners) in English. Oral proficiency in English is critical as well - but student performance suggests that it is often overlooked in instruction. Well-developed oral proficiency in English is associated with English reading comprehension and writing skills for these students. It is not enough to teach language-minority students reading skills alone. **Extensive oral English development** must be incorporated into successful literacy instruction. The most successful literacy instructional practices for ELLs are programs that provide instructional support of oral language development in English, aligned with high-quality literacy instruction.

Findings of the National Literacy Panel

Phonemic Awareness. Phonemic awareness is difficult for ELLs because they may not yet have enough experience with English to be able to distinguish sounds that differ from those of their native language. These differences vary from one language to another. Teachers will have to identify which sounds of English cause confusion, depending on the language backgrounds of their students, and provide more practice in these sounds.

Phonics. Systematic phonics instruction can be very effective in helping newcomer English language learners, even those at fairly low levels of language proficiency, to learn to decode words. Most ELLs will need additional time and practice to learn to hear and produce the sounds of English, to learn the meanings of the words used in phonics instruction, to learn the multiple combinations of letters that make the same sound, and to learn many more sight words than native English speakers need. Additional time for phonics instruction should be built into reading programs for ELLs.

Oral language development. Phonics and phonemic skills, though important for newcomers, do not facilitate reading comprehension if students' oral language proficiency is not developed to the level of the texts they are expected to read. For this reason, reading instruction should be combined with intensive development of the oral language needed to understand the text. The most effective reading programs for ELLs combine systematic phonics instruction with a print-rich environment that provides exposure to appealing reading materials in varied genres.

Vocabulary. English language learners are many thousand words behind their native English speaking peers. They need more vocabulary instruction than their native-speaking peers; they also need multiple exposures to the vocabulary to be able to retain new words. Everything a teacher of ELLs does should revolve around vocabulary acquisition - explaining, demonstrating, drawing, repeating, rephrasing, reading, writing, and manipulating with words throughout every aspect of instruction. The meanings of words are acquired through multiple opportunities to hear, say, read, and write the words in slightly different meaningful contexts. Teachers will have to create these contexts in the classroom, since incidental learning of vocabulary cannot be relied on for ELLs. Collaboration between mainstream classroom instruction and ESL program is a key to effective and consistent vocabulary development of ELL students.

Comprehension. ELL newcomers, especially students with interrupted formal schooling, are more likely than native speakers to lack the background knowledge necessary for understanding texts, that's why teachers will need to find ways to build that knowledge for these students. As has been mentioned above, their knowledge of vocabulary is only a fraction of what it is for native speakers of English, and the failure to understand even a few words of a text can have negative effects on comprehension. **Integration of intensive language development with reading instruction** is highly recommended for ELLs at all levels of language proficiency, providing as much nonverbal support for reading comprehension as possible. Comprehension strategies, such as reader-generated questions, summarizing, and monitoring comprehension need to be explicitly taught to newcomer ELLs. However, teaching these strategies is not enough; students must practice them with texts that are accessible at their level of language proficiency. If students don't experience successful application of comprehension strategies, they won't even try to use them with other texts. Interactive activities, properly scaffolded for ELLs, should be planned around reading and interpreting texts. Sharing ideas, comparing perspectives, and coming to agreement (or agreeing to disagree) are all ways that students use the language of the text in meaningful ways, and thus progress to higher levels of language proficiency and reading comprehension.

Resources

1. Institute of Education Sciences. *Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades*. Practice guide. The target audience is a broad spectrum of school practitioners such as administrators, curriculum specialists, coaches, staff development specialists and teachers, to help them develop practice and policy options for their schools. The Guide offers five *specific recommendations* for district administrators and indicates the *quality of the evidence* that supports these recommendations. NCEE 2007-4011, U.S. Department of Education.

<<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/20074011.pdf>>

2. National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth. *Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

<<http://www.cal.org/projects/archive/natlitpanel.html>>