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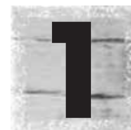
Introduction



> The teacher should clearly see whether the end to which a school exercise looks is skill or knowledge-practical power or intellectual power.
>
> Hinsdale (1896, p. 11)

English language learners (ELLs) come into the K–12 setting without the strong preparation in English reading skills that native-English-speaking (NES) students have had (Barone & Xu, 2008; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006; Sousa, 2008; Syrja, 2011). Yet with 1 year of English as a second language (ESL) classes, ELLs are expected to make up for years of reading lessons and practice, and to read textbooks in English "at grade level." English is the medium of instruction in the United States, so all students, including ELLs, are expected to learn content material in all of their courses (math, science, history) not just in their ESL or English language arts classes. Because reading is the foundation for learning in every class, in many ways all teachers are in part English teachers. Unfortunately, K–12 content-area teachers, librarians, reading specialists, and support staff may not be trained to meet the literacy needs of ELLs, even if they recognize those needs.

The underlying difference between ELLs' reading abilities and those of their English-language-speaking peers is time and experience: In U.S. K–12 schools, students learn how to read up to third grade. From fourth grade on, they are expected to be able to read in order to learn. ELLs come into the U.S. school system from a variety of language backgrounds and learning experiences and are trying to learn how to read English while being expected to learn from the readings that are assigned by teachers in their content-area classes. ELLs do not learn to read at the same rate as their NES peers. Nor do all ELLs learn at the same rate (Klingner, Almanza, de Onis, & Barletta, 2008; Orosco, de Schonewise, de Onis, Klingner, & Hoover, 2008). Even within NES student populations, there

are clear differences in rate and level of achievement between students who have been exposed to large amounts of text and those who have not (Stanovich, 2000; Stanovich & Cunningham, 1993; Stanovich, & West, 1989; Stanovich, West, & Harrison, 1995).

In the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages, research has demonstrated that whereas ELLs can achieve basic interpersonal communicative skills in English within 2 years of living in an ESL community (Cummins, 1979, 2000, 2005), it takes an additional 5–7 years for the same students to catch up to their NES peers in the area of cognitive academic language proficiency. In other words, ELLs may be conversant in English, but they lack the language ability needed to learn age-appropriate content materials in the medium of English.

The reason for this lag is that ELLs are continuously playing catch-up with their NES peers, or as Pilgreen (2010) put it, "older students have more to achieve and less time to do it" (p. 2). NES students have a basic English vocabulary of about 5,000 words once they begin school (Stahl, 1999), although their "mastery of vocabulary acquisition . . . is still vastly incomplete" (Pythian-Sence & Wagner, 2007, p. 1). However, even ELLs who appear to be fluent in layman's terms—those who can carry out conversations about familiar topics in and around school settings—often have a vocabulary of only 2,000 of the most common words in English. This suggests that ELLs who can speak and understand basic conversational English when they enter U.S. schools still need to learn 3,000 new words in order to catch up to first-grade NES students. Each year, U.S. students expand their vocabularies through class work and extensive reading, raising the bar for English learning vocabulary targets, and widening the gap. Similar to the Matthew Effect, a theory that says that as faster readers read more, they get better at reading (Stanovich, 1986, 2000), NES students who have a higher entering vocabulary can be expected to expand their vocabulary knowledge faster than ELLs who have a lower entering vocabulary (Nation, 1990).

Given that ELLs are not reading at grade level, many face a downward spiral (Stahl, 1999; Stanovich, 2000): Because they have difficulty reading, they don't like to read; because they don't like to read, they don't read as much as their NES peers; because they don't read as much, their reading does not improve as quickly; because their reading does not improve, they get discouraged and don't like to read. The spiral starts over again (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997).

Language is the medium of instruction in the United States, and the main source for new learning is reading. Textbooks are the primary source for all school content, but Cunningham and Stanovich (1997) found in their longitudinal study of K–12 students that those who read more outside the classroom surpassed their peers in every test category (including non-English subjects such as math and history) by a wide margin. When students cannot easily read at grade level, they find all of their lessons more difficult, and they are less likely to read for pleasure outside of class. Without appropriate reading skills, ELLs fall behind in history, science, math, and basic cultural capital. The purpose of this book is to explain the reading challenges ELLs face, and to present some suggestions for overcoming this basic limitation to their academic advancement.