Literacy and the ELL Student

Best Practices for Increasing Reading Development

By

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Introduction

With the English Language Learners’ population rapidly growing in our schools, administrators and teachers alike feel inadequate and uninformed on how to provide effective instruction for these students.

Nationally, the number of ELL students in public schools increased from approximately million students in 1993-94 to 3 million students in 1999-2000. ELL students represented approximately 7 percent of the national public school population in 1999-2000, up from 5 percent in 1994. (Meyer, Madden & McGrath, 2004, p.1)

In their article, Teacher Skills to Support English Language Learners, Short and Echevarria (2004) write: “In the 2003-2004 school year, 5.5 million school age children were English Language Learners – up nearly 100 percent from a decade earlier, although total enrollment increased only slightly more than 10 percent during that time” (p. 9).

The growing reading achievement gap between multicultural students and mainstream students, as documented by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), has been a cause of concern for many years. Kathryn H. Au, in her article, Multicultural Factors and the Effective Instruction of Students of Diverse Backgrounds (2005) reports:

The NAEP evaluates reading performance in terms of three levels: basic, proficient, and advanced. Across all grade levels, 39-47% of white students were at the above proficient level, compared to 10-18% of African American students and 13-26% of Hispanic students. (p. 392-393)

There are many theories on the best practices of teaching reading to the second-language learner, however up to this point, there are no scientifically tested answers to the best ways of helping the ELL student achieve literacy. Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998), as cited by Lenters, made the following observation in their national report for the National Research Council:

Surprisingly, given the many millions of initially non-English speaking children who have acquired literacy in English in the United States, and given the many millions of dollars expended on efforts to evaluate bilingual education programs, straightforward,
data based answers to [specific questions regarding acquisition of second –language literacy] are not available. (Lenters, 2004, p. 328)

Lenters states that some researchers contend that second language reading instruction should be delayed until the student can read in his/her first language. In their opinion, if the world was a perfect place and all conditions were ideal, children would receive instruction in their first language to the point where they were proficient in all aspects of it. This usually occurs around the age of 7. Reading instruction in English would then build on the skills the child knew about reading in the first language and would involve transfer of skills. Others question the wisdom of waiting that long, and contend that reading instruction in English needs to begin immediately. In many cases teaching reading in the learner’s first language would be impossible, since bilingual programs are not available to all. It is also important to take into account the age and literacy background of the second-language learner, and remember that each child is different with different needs to be addressed. The world is not ideal, and children come to us not knowing how to read in their first language (Lenters, 2004). This paper will explore literature which may help clarify how English Language Learners learn, some best practices for teaching reading to Second Language Learners, and identify some guidelines to help these children become literate in the English language.
How ELL Students Learn

In order to begin literacy instruction to the ELL student, one must understand how the student attains second language acquisition. Jim Cummins’ work on second language acquisition is still viewed as the primary framework for understanding bilingualism in education (Hickman, Pollard-Durodola & Vaughn, 2004).

Jim Cummins believes that language proficiency and acquisition develops through two functions. The first he calls BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills.) These include the lower order thinking skills, identifying, labeling, naming, describing, sequencing, and the formal aspects of language such as pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. These skills require usually two to five years to master.

The second function he identifies as CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiencies). These skills involve the higher order of thinking which include inference, comparison and contrast, analyzing, synthesizing, semantic meaning and functional aspects of language. This second function may take five to seven years to develop. It is Cummins’ hypothesis that the aspects of language that make up CALP are vastly more important to the student’s educational progress than the aspects of BICS. The importance of Cummins’ theory is that, although an ELL student may develop a good level of conversational English (BICS) in two years or so, the student would require five to seven years to develop academic language, or the verbal cognitive skills of a native speaker (CALP). An ELL child who does not perform academically up to par may be diagnosed inaccurately with a learning disability, when in actuality; the student has yet to develop the appropriate CALP language skills (Cummins, 1984).
In order to make it easier to conceptualize and understand the distinctions between BICS and CALP, Cummins developed a 2 dimensional graph. This graph emphasizes the patterns in which ELL students learn and how they should be taught. It differentiates between tasks that are cognitively undemanding and demanding, as well as tasks that contain both embedded and reduced contextual support. Examples of how this conceptualization can be applied to lesson plans, and a more detailed explanation of cognitive demand can be found immediately following the graph.

SEE GRAPH (NEXT PAGE)
Jim Cumming’s Two Dimensional Graph

**COGNITIVELY DEMANDING**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listening Skills - Demonstration of a process. Lesson with demonstration and illustration.</th>
<th>Listening Skills - Content-subject explanation without demonstration or illustration.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading Skills - Heavily illustrated textbooks. Math word problems with concrete referents or pictures</td>
<td>Writing Skills - Composition, Essays.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Four Language Skills - Making models, charts, and maps.</td>
<td>Reading and Writing Skills - Research and report</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading Skills</td>
<td>Writing Skills - Copying words and sentences. Written pattern exercises.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading and writing skills - Writing answers to lower</td>
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**COGNITIVELY UNDEMANDING**

On this diagram the horizontal line measures the amount of contextual support that is provided. An example of context embedded would be pictures, gestures, props, charts, visual and word associations and acting out meanings. The reduced end of context would be only linguistic examples (Cummins, 1984).

In order to explain this two-dimensional approach, Tony Cline and Norah Frederickson (1996) use the example of the sentence, ‘I like to skip.’ If the child was asked to read this sentence alone in a reading test, this would be an example of a context reduced situation. If the sentence, ‘I like to skip,’ was to be read by the student under a picture which they had drawn, depicting a child skipping rope, this would be an example of context embedded written language. Another example of giving contextual support to a bilingual student would be to write the directions, ‘Pour ½ cup of water into the bowl,’ but to also accompany the sentence with a picture or chart showing a half-cup of water being poured into a bowl.

Cummins regards cognitive demand as using internal and external factors. External factors refer to the complexity of the tasks….addition is easier than multiplication. He refers to internal factors as being what the child is familiar with, as well as the student’s level of proficiency. Some tasks which would be cognitively undemanding for a native speaker would be very difficult to a student of a second language. The importance of this framework is that it shows the teacher how to maintain the ELL student’s level of cognitive complexity by making the question more context embedded, so the child can understand, even with limited linguistic skills what is expected of him. In other words, usually when a student is having difficulty understanding a concept, the teacher makes the activity easier…thus making the child less challenged. Using Cummins’ framework, the teacher will be able to retain the same complexity of the question, but add pictures, gestures, or some visual aide to facilitate the student’s ability to
understand the question. The child will still be intellectually challenged, but better able to comprehend the question being asked of him (Cline & Fredrickson, 1996).

**Best Practices for Teaching Reading to ELL Students**

There are five areas of reading instruction, which are comprised of vocabulary, text comprehension, phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency (National Reading Panel, 2000).

**Vocabulary.**

Before attempting reading instruction to ELL students, the student’s oral vocabulary should be developed to the point of basic communication. Vocabulary training should continue to grow so the student will have adequate vocabulary knowledge in preparation of reading more difficult text. This can be done by vocabulary scaffolding through prereading activities, repeated reading of simple texts and listening to tape recording of simple stories. A good activity would be to highlight the vocabulary and story structure of favorite, simple stories that are being read in class. The student should then reconstruct the stories in bookmaking activities. This activity gives the children books that they can use to read and reread for oral and sight vocabulary development.

When one begins reading instruction, the child should know 90-95% of the vocabulary found in the books being used. They should read and reread the texts, and all books should be graded readers to make sure that the children continue to develop new vocabulary (Lenters, 2004).

In their article, *Storybook Reading: Improving Vocabulary and Comprehension for English Language Learners* (2004), Hickman, Pollard-Durodola and Vaughn recommend several practices that should be used by educators to help provide language development related to
literacy and oral language growth to ELL students. These practices are particularly valuable when teaching vocabulary.

Practices highlighted in the literature for supporting development in those areas for ELLs include the following:

- Integrating the teaching of word meanings with the content area and context in which they will be used, rather than as a separate list of words and definitions. Particularly important are relating vocabulary to the content area topic and showing connections between words through such activities as semantic mapping and word family associations.
- Addressing basic vocabulary that is difficult to visualize (abstract words and modifiers) as well as vocabulary that is rich and evocative, thereby increasing student challenge and engagement with words.
- Providing guided discussions with students and encouraging higher level, elaborated responses with regard to vocabulary, structure, and use.
- Using culturally relevant texts as well as those that incorporate aspects of students’ life experiences to draw upon prior knowledge to promote comprehension and retention of text concepts and new vocabulary. (Hickman, Pollard-Durodola and Vaughn, 2004, p. 721)

In addition to these strategies, Hickman, Pollard-Durodola and Vaughn strongly recommend using teacher read-alouds frequently, if not daily, to help enhance the literacy of ELL students.

*Reading comprehension.*

Reading comprehension is also an important area that needs to be addressed when discussing literacy and the ESL student. The language experience approach to teaching has been proven to be a useful and successful method for teaching early reading skills to the second-language child. As stated previously, the language experience book-making methods help the students to make the connection between the oral and written language.

Another good comprehension activity is the use of the “cut up sentence.” The student should dictate a story, and then under the guidance of a proficient speaker, the student would cut up the sentences into individual words and glue them onto papers to make a booklet which will later be illustrated by the child (Lenters, 2004).
The materials used for reading instruction should be materials that present diverse cultures in a meaningful and authentic manner. The children should be familiar with the subject material presented in the books, and as much as possible, contextual clues should be included in the text (Ruddell, 2005).

*Phonemic awareness and phonics.*

Gerstein and Geva, in their article, *Teaching Reading to Early Language Learners* (2003), relate that the latest research all early readers, native English speakers and ELL students, all take similar paths when developing pre-reading skills such as phonological awareness. They state:

Each language has different phonological characteristics, of course, and English learners may encounter specific difficulties related to their home language especially during the initial learning phases. These difficulties are fairly predictable, however, and should lead to proactive teaching that focuses on potentially problematic sounds and letter combinations. In fact, new research suggests that with appropriate instruction, English Language Learners can learn phonological awareness and decoding skills in English as rapidly as native speakers can. (Gerstein and Geva, 2003, p. 44)

In her paper, *No Half Measures: Reading Instruction for Young Second-Language Learners* (2004), Lenters reports that second-language learners benefit from explicit instruction in the second-language sound-symbol system. She recommends using a multisensory program like the *Jolly Phonics* program to teach phonics and alphabet development. This program is a: “Multisensory program that employs systematic, cumulative overlearning of the names, sounds, and symbols of the English alphabet, as well as the common blends and digraphs (i.e., it combines phonemic awareness training with early phonic skill)” (Lenters, 2004, p. 333).

*Fluency.*

One of the problems uniformly met when teaching reading to English Language Learners (ELLs) is the ability to read fluently in a second language. Fluency can be defined as the ability
to read quickly and accurately (Armbruster, Lehr & Osborn, 2000). The final report of the National Reading Panel (2000) defines a fluent reader as one who can read orally with speed, accuracy, and proper expression. The report continues to define a fluent reader as a person who can perform multiple tasks – such as word recognition and comprehension – at the same time. A reader who is completely fluent can read and decode effortlessly and accurately, thus allowing the reader more time to correctly comprehend the text (Wolfe, 2003). Rasinski (2005) states that some of the best practices for teaching reading fluency include modeling reading fluency for the students by providing oral reading support to them while they read along, and to expose the students to repeated readings of text while focusing on proper and meaningful phrasing. The report of the National Reading Panel (2000) identified repeated guided oral reading specifically for its effectiveness in helping all students across a range of grade levels with not only fluency, but also word recognition and comprehension. Samuels, in his classic article, *The Method of Repeated Readings* (1979), introduced the Repeated Reading technique, which was based on his automaticity theory. This theory suggests that fluent readers are readers who can decode text automatically thus leaving more time and attention free for better comprehension. One of the best ways to achieve automaticity is through practice and repeated readings (Samuels, 1979).

As reading speed increased, word recognition errors decreased. As the student continued to use this technique, the initial speed of reading each new selection was faster than initial speed on the previous selection. Also, the number of re-readings required to reach the criterion reading speed decreased as the students continued the technique. The fact that starting rates were faster with each new selection and fewer re-readings were necessary to reach goals indicates transfer of training and a general improvement in reading fluency. (Samuels, 1979, p. 377)

In 1997, the *Reading Teacher* reissued this article. For that publication, Samuels reaffirmed his initial findings stating that they had been replicated in almost 200 studies. He continued to state that there is a transfer of fluency to other parts of the text, even to parts that
were not part of the repeated readings, and that some studies have reported an increase of reading comprehension through repeated readings. He finishes by stating that repeated reading is now the most commonly used reading technique to help struggling readers achieve reading skill (Samuels, 1997).

Additional Guidelines

Coltrane, in her article, Working with Young English Language Learners: Some Considerations (2003), states that young ELLs need to develop English and their first language skills simultaneously. It is important to remember that these students use their native language as the primary mode of communication with their parents and family. Children should be exposed to meaningful interactions in both languages. Such interactions can include verbal interactions as well as exposure to printed materials and other media (Coltrane, 2003).

Lenters writes that one of the most important practices to ensure successful English literacy in the second-language student is to involve the family to continue to read and to have meaningful conversations with the child in their first language. Use of the first language should be encouraged by allowing the child to show what they can do in their native language. First language books, which match the second language texts, should be purchased and used, and first-language literacy in the homes should be encouraged. Whenever possible, instruction in the first language should also be encouraged. The richness of the child’s culture and diversity should be acknowledged and praised as a valuable addition to the school and to our education system (Lenters, 2004).

An important variable that affects literacy and the ELL student is the lack of professional development for teachers and administrators who instruct and come into contact with these students and their families.
Another variable that affects English language learners’ academic learning is the quality of instruction they receive. Although No Child Left Behind calls for highly qualified teachers in every core academic classroom by 2006, few states require that teachers of core content areas have any background or training in second-language acquisition, English as a second language (ESL) methods, or cross-cultural communication. (Short & Echevarria, 2004, p.10)

Li and Zhang, in their article, *Why Mei Still Cannot Read and What Can Be Done* (2004), discuss the need for more education and professional development for classroom teachers and administrators:

The Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs (2003) reported that there is a massive shortage of teachers certified to teach LEP students, and less than 1 in 5 teachers who currently serve LEP students are certified to teach them. (Li & Zhang 2004, p. 92)

They go on to state:

School populations are becoming more diverse not only in big U.S. cities but also in small, rural towns. However, the teachers serving diverse student populations are not fully prepared…both teacher education and professional development programs have an obligation to prepare preservice and in-service classroom teachers and designated ESL teachers with knowledge, skills, and strategies to teach ESL students. ESL teachers have to work with classroom teachers, support staff, and parents to plan, implement, and supervise an adequate program for each ESL student on the basis of the students’ educational background, native language ability, age of arrival, and parents’ educational and occupational background. (Li & Zhang, 2004. p. 100)

Summary and Conclusion

In conclusion, following some of the practices outlined above should help ensure success in developing literacy skills in our second-language children being educated in our schools. It is very important to always take into account the ELL student’s literacy background and age and to remember how ELLs learn.

When beginning oral and reading instruction, teachers should make sure that contextualized materials are used, as well as materials with which the student is familiar.
Scaffolding vocabulary development through pre-reading activities, repeated readings and tape recording of simple stories are helpful strategies.

Reading strategies such as the language experience approach, the cut up sentence, teacher read alouds, and shared reading can be very beneficial. Books that present diverse cultures and authentic materials should be used as much as possible. Teachers should remember to support and encourage first language acquisition. A good practice would be to use bilingual books which present the story in both languages. Furthermore, teachers should send home books written in the student’s first language to be read at home by the parents.

Repeated and modeled readings should be used to increase fluency. Strategies that incorporate this could be choral reading and books on tape.

One should always involve the family in all aspects of the child’s education. When necessary, an interpreter should be present for meetings and phone messages. Schools should make sure that information sent home to parents are written in a language the parents understand. First language literacy should be encouraged and continued as much as possible. Finally, all teachers should become familiar with some of the best practices for reaching our ever-increasing ELL population. Districts and schools should provide workshops and professional development for all teachers who come in contact with ELL students. Educating these children is a group responsibility, not the sole responsibility of the ESL teacher. “The No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) leaves schools, large and small, no excuse but to resort to all educational means to help every child, including LEP students, to be successful in school (Li & Zhang, 2004, p. 92).”
References


