

Reading Instruction and Reading Achievement Among ELL Students

Principles of ELL Reading Instruction

Some very straightforward principles, directly supported by research, underlie the provision of effective reading instruction for ELL students (English language learners). In order to understand these principles, we must first consider the differences between decoding and comprehension. *Decoding* refers to the process of identifying the relationship between written words and their spoken equivalents. The processes of understanding that spoken words are composed of individual sounds (phonological awareness) and developing the ability to map these sounds onto the written language (phonics) are central to the development of decoding ability. *Comprehension*, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which individuals understand the meaning of texts that they have read. This involves not only understanding different words (vocabulary) but also the ways in which these words are organized in sentences and paragraphs to create meaning.

Scientific research conducted in the United States and elsewhere has shown clearly that these two basic components of reading—decoding and comprehension—are conceptually distinct. In their review of the research on literacy development among ELL students, Lesaux, Koda, Siegel, and Shanahan (2006) point to the differences:

Although readiness skills (e.g., phonological awareness and concepts of print) and word-level skills (e.g., word reading and spelling) are important in the early stages of literacy acquisition, and indeed are requisite for reading comprehension, they are not sufficient as effective text-level skills. At a higher level are reading comprehension and writing of connected text—complex text-level skills that require conceptual processing, such as drawing on prior knowledge, making inferences, and resolving structural and semantic ambiguities. (p. 99)

Research also shows that the development of both word-level and text-level skills benefits from a balanced approach to reading instruction that combines the provision of ample opportunities for literacy engagement with an emphasis on clarifying for students how the language works. The National Reading Panel (2000) emphasized the importance of implementing a balanced approach that combined systematic phonics with the use of high-quality literature. The report emphasized that “systematic phonics instruction should be integrated with other reading instruction to create a balanced reading program” (pp. 2–136). The findings of the *Reading First Impact Study* (Gamse et al., 2008) illustrate the fact that a predominant emphasis on decoding, to the neglect



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of reading comprehension, is likely to benefit decoding skills but result in no improvement in comprehension. This study reported that Reading First exerted a positive impact on decoding skills at grade one but no influence on reading comprehension skills at grades one, two, or three.

Aspects of Proficiency

In order to understand patterns of reading development among ELL students, we must distinguish among three very different aspects of proficiency in a language: (1) conversational fluency, (2) discrete language skills, and (3)

“In order to understand patterns of reading development among ELL students, we must distinguish among three very different aspects of proficiency in a language: (1) conversational fluency, (2) discrete language skills, and (3) academic language proficiency.”

academic language proficiency. The rationale for making these distinctions is that each dimension of proficiency follows very different developmental paths among both ELL and non-ELL students, and each responds differently to particular kinds of instructional practices in school.

Conversational Fluency This dimension of language proficiency represents the ability to carry on a conversation in familiar face-to-face situations. The vast majority of native speakers of English have developed conversational fluency when they enter school at age five. This fluency involves use of high-frequency words and simple grammatical constructions. ELL students generally develop fluency in conversational aspects of English within a year or two of intensive exposure to the language either in school or in the environment.

Discrete Language Skills These skills reflect specific phonological, literacy, and grammatical knowledge that students can acquire through explicit instruction or

through immersion in a literacy- and language-rich environment either in home or school. Students exposed to a literacy-rich environment in the home generally acquire initial literacy-related skills, such as phonemic awareness and letter-sound correspondences, with minimal difficulty in the early grades of schooling.

ELL students can learn these specific language skills concurrently with their development of basic vocabulary and conversational fluency. However, little direct transference is observed to other aspects of oral-language proficiency, such as linguistic concepts, vocabulary, sentence memory, and word memory (Geva, 2000).

Academic Language Proficiency This dimension of proficiency includes knowledge of the less-frequent vocabulary of English as well as the ability to interpret and produce increasingly complex written language. As students progress through the grades, they encounter far more low-frequency words (primarily from Greek and Latin sources), complex syntax (for example, passive constructions), and abstract expressions that are virtually never heard in everyday conversation. Students are required to understand linguistically and conceptually demanding texts in the content areas (for example, literature, social studies, science, mathematics) and to use this language in an accurate and coherent way in their own writing.

The complexity of academic language reflects the following:

- the difficulty of the concepts that students are required to understand
- the vocabulary load in content texts that include many low-frequency and technical words that we almost never use in typical conversation; many of these words come from Latin and Greek sources (for example, *predict*, *photosynthesis*, *sequence*, *revolution*, etc.)
- increasingly sophisticated grammatical constructions (for example, passive voice) that again are almost never used in everyday conversational contexts

We find academic language predominantly in books. Therefore, students who read extensively both inside and outside the school have far greater opportunities to acquire academic language than those whose reading is limited.

All three aspects of language proficiency are important. However, policymakers and the media frequently confuse them. Many ELL students who have acquired conversational fluency and decoding skills in English are still a long way from grade-level performance in academic language proficiency. Students who can “read” English fluently may have only a very limited understanding of the words they can decode.

How long does it take English learners to acquire academic English?

An extensive body of research reports that ELL students typically require at least five years to catch up to native speakers in academic language proficiency. By contrast, it usually takes only about one to two years for students to become reasonably fluent in everyday conversational language. These trajectories reflect both the increased linguistic complexity of academic language and the fact that English learners are attempting to catch up to a moving target. Students whose first language is English are not standing still waiting for ELL students to catch up. Every year, they make gains in reading, writing, and vocabulary abilities. So ELL students have to run faster to bridge the gap. In fact, in order to catch up within six years, ELL students must make a fifteen-month gain in every ten-month school year. The “average” student, by definition, makes just a ten-month gain in every ten-month school year.

Why is conversational English faster to acquire than academic English?

We can function well in most familiar everyday situations with a relatively small vocabulary of high-frequency words. Linguists estimate that knowledge of about two thousand word families is enough to get by in most conversational situations. There are many clues to meaning in face-to-face conversation—eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, intonation, and so on. So we don’t need to know as much of the language to understand the meaning or make ourselves understood. By contrast, the language used in schools and more formal

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situations lacks these face-to-face supports and entails many more low-frequency words and difficult grammatical constructions.

What specific challenges do struggling readers face in catching up academically?

The learning difficulties faced by struggling readers can derive from a variety of sources, regardless of whether their home language is English or a language other than English. Some students experience difficulties in acquiring decoding skills and fall behind from an early stage; other students acquire reasonably fluent decoding skills but experience difficulties around grades three or four when the conceptual and linguistic load of the curriculum becomes significantly more intense than in earlier grades. Intervention for struggling readers should address the specific difficulties they are experiencing. If the problems lie in decoding, then we should provide support focused on helping students acquire the sound-symbol relationships that characterize English written text. If the problems lie in the area of reading comprehension, we should focus on building up vocabulary knowledge and encouraging students to read extensively and talk about the books they have read. In both cases, we should strive for a balanced approach—building up students’ awareness of how written language works while simultaneously encouraging students to engage actively with reading and writing.

What instructional strategies are effective in enabling ELL students and struggling readers to develop academic language?

Sustained growth in reading and writing skills is strongly related to students’ levels of literacy engagement. Reading researcher John Guthrie (2004) summarized this research by noting that students

whose family background was characterized by low income and low education, but who were highly engaged readers, substantially outscored students who came from backgrounds with higher education and higher income, but who themselves were less engaged readers. Based on a massive sample, this finding suggests the stunning conclusion that engaged reading can overcome traditional barriers to reading achievement, including gender, parental education, and income. (p. 5)

Scaffolds for Literacy Engagement

We can promote literacy engagement among ELL students and struggling readers by using “scaffolds,” or supports to make the input more comprehensible (for example, through graphic organizers or demonstrations). It is also important to scaffold students’ use of language, particularly their written language. For example, newcomer students can be encouraged to write initially in their first language (L1) and then work from L1 to English (L2), possibly with the help of classmates.

Effective instruction for ELL students and struggling readers will also activate students’ prior knowledge and build background knowledge as needed. Learning can be defined as the integration of new knowledge or skills with the knowledge or skills we already possess. Therefore it is crucial to activate ELL students’ preexisting knowledge so that they can relate new information to what they already know.

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