



English Language Learners and the Five Essential Components of Reading Instruction

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Find out how teachers can play to the strengths and shore up the weaknesses of English Language Learners in each of the Reading First content areas.

In this article:

Phonemic awareness

Phonics

Vocabulary development

Reading fluency, including oral reading skills

Reading comprehension strategies

This article provides recommendations and considerations for instruction of ELLs within each of the Reading First components. It should be kept in mind, however, that the Reading First components did not originate from studies including ELLs, and that despite research indicating a need for native language instruction, any discussion within the context of Reading First is about teaching ELLs to read in English.

1. Phonemic awareness

Phonemes are the smallest units making up spoken language. English consists of about 41 phonemes. Phonemes combine to form syllables and words. For example, the word stop has four phonemes (s-t-o-p), while shop has three phonemes (sh-o-p). Phonemic awareness refers to the ability to identify and manipulate these phonemes in spoken words. It is

also the understanding that the sounds of spoken language work together to make words.

The following two songs, the first in English, and the second in Spanish, represent poems that, because of their easy rhyme and repetition, can be used to teach phonemic awareness.

Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack, All dressed in black, black, black, With silver buttons, buttons, buttons, All down her back, back, back She asked her mother, mother, mother, For fifty cents, cents, cents, To see the elephant, elephant, elephant, Jump over the fence, fence, fence. He jumped so high, high, high, He reached the sky, sky, sky, And he never came back, back, back, 'Till the fourth of July, 'ly, 'ly.

Bate, bate, chocolate, tu nariz de cacahuete. Uno, dos, tres, CHO! Uno, dos, tres, CO! Uno, dos, tres, LA! Uno, dos, tres, TE! Chocolate, chocolate! Bate, bate, chocolate! Bate, bate, bate, bate, Bate, bate, CHOCOLATE!

Considerations when instructing ELLs in phonemic awareness

Some phonemes may not be present in ELLs' native language and, therefore, may be difficult for a student to pronounce and distinguish auditorily, as well as to place into a meaningful context. For ELLs, as with all students, it is important that instruction have meaning, so that the words and sounds students are manipulating are familiar. It is therefore necessary for ELLs to have knowledge of the English vocabulary words within which they are to understand phonemes. Teachers can teach phonemic awareness while also explicitly teaching vocabulary words, their meaning, and their pronunciation to ELLs.

Children's minds are trained to categorize phonemes in their first language, which may conflict with English phonemes. For example, Spanish-speaking children may speak, read, and write ch when sh should be used because in Spanish, these two combinations produce the same phoneme (International Reading Association, 2001).

Teachers can enable phonemic awareness in English for ELLs by understanding the linguistic characteristics of students' native language, including the phonemes that exist and do not exist in the native language.

Scientifically-based research suggests that ELLs respond well to meaningful activities such as language games and word walls, especially when the activities are consistent and focus on particular sounds and letters. Songs and poems, with their rhythm and repetition, are easily memorized and can be used to teach phonemic awareness and print concepts to ELLs (Hiebert, et al., 1998). These rhymes exist in every language and teachers can ask students or their parents to share these culturally relevant and teachable rhymes with the class, and build phonemic awareness activities around them.

2. Phonics

Phonics is the understanding that there is a predictable relationship between phonemes (the sounds of spoken language) and graphemes (the letters and spellings that represent those sounds in written language). Readers use these relationships to recognize familiar words and to decode unfamiliar ones.

Phonics instruction is a way of teaching reading that stresses learning how letters correspond to sounds and how to use this knowledge in reading and spelling. The goal is to help children understand that there is a systematic and predictable relationship between written letters and spoken sounds (CIERA, 2001).

Considerations when instructing ELLs in phonics

Students who are not literate in their own language or whose language does not have a written form may not understand some concepts and need to be taught about the functions of print (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000).

Students may have learned to read and write in a native language in which the letters correspond to different sounds than they do in English, or they may have learned to read and write in a language with characters that correspond to words or portions of words. For example, "alphabetic writing systems such as the three different ones used for English, Greek, and Russian represent speech sounds or phonemes with letters or letter sequences. In contrast, in logographic writing systems, such as Chinese, each written character represents a meaning unit or morpheme; while in syllabic writing systems, such as kana in Japanese and Sequoyah's Cherokee syllabify, each written symbol represents a syllable (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000, p. 241)."

In Spanish (the native language of 77 percent of ELLs in U.S. schools, [NCBE, 2002]), the letters b, c, d, f, l, m, n, p, q, s, and t represent sounds that are similar enough to English that they may transfer readily to English reading for many students. Consequently, many students need minimal phonics instruction for these consonants. In contrast, vowel letters look the same in Spanish and English but are named differently and represent very different sounds. Therefore, English vowel sounds and their numerous spellings present a challenge to Spanish literate students learning to read English because the one-to-one correspondence between vowel letters and vowel sounds in Spanish does not hold true in English (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000).

These examples represent not simply the challenges in teaching ELLs to read in English, but also illustrate that teachers can effectively teach phonics and all of the Reading First components if they are armed with knowledge about their students and their native language.

3. Vocabulary development

Vocabulary development refers to the knowledge of stored information about the meanings and pronunciations of words necessary for communication. Vocabulary development is important for beginning

reading in that when a student comes to a word and sounds it out, he or she is also determining if the word makes sense based on his or her understanding of the word. If a student does not know the meaning of the word, there is no way to check if the word fits, or to make meaning from the sentence. Vocabulary development is also a primary determinant of reading comprehension. Readers cannot understand the content of what they are reading unless they understand the meaning of the majority of words in the text.

A second grade class of ELLs is about to engage in a lesson in which they sequence events in a story. The teacher chooses to use the book, *The Tortilla Factory* by Gary Paulsen, which recounts the steps in making tortillas.

To begin the lesson, the teacher shows students a bag of tortillas and asks students to show by thumbs up: Who has eaten tortillas? Helped make tortillas? Knows what ingredients go into making tortillas? Can show motions for types of ways to manipulate the dough? Teacher prompts students to name key vocabulary as she writes these words on index cards placed into a pocket chart: dough, corn, plants, kernels, round, grind, bake, factory. Either the teacher or a student then explains each word.

Before reading *The Tortilla Factory* aloud, the teacher distributes these words on index cards to pairs of students. While the teacher is reading aloud, pairs hold up their words and/or model the motions that go with the vocabulary for each part of the tortilla making process that is detailed in the book.

Considerations when instructing ELLs in vocabulary

Vocabulary development is one of the greatest challenges to reading instruction for ELLs, because in order to read fluently and comprehend what is written, students need to use not just phonics, but context. It is possible for students to read completely phonetically and not comprehend what they have read because they do not have the vocabulary. Therefore, vocabulary needs to be taught explicitly and be a part of the daily curriculum in addition to learning to read. This can be done through class time devoted strictly to English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Language

Development (ELD).

Scientific research on vocabulary development demonstrates that children learn the majority of their vocabulary indirectly in the following three ways:

Through conversations, mostly with adults;

Listening to adults read to them; and

Reading extensively on their own (CIERA, 2001).

This finding has serious consequences for ELLs, whose parents and other adults in their lives are often not fluent in English. It is therefore extremely important for educators of ELLs to know and incorporate the ways that students learn vocabulary directly, including: explicitly teaching vocabulary words before students read a text, how to use dictionaries, how to use prefixes and suffixes to decipher word meanings, and how to use context clues (CIERA, 2001).

In the discussion of literacy development for ELLs, it is useful to consider a theory that distinguishes the language proficiency needed for everyday, face-to-face communication (BICS, for Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills) from the proficiency needed to comprehend and manipulate language in the decontextualized educational setting (CALP, for Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) (Cummins, 1992). The BICS/CALP distinction highlights the fact that some aspects of language proficiency are considerably more relevant for students' cognitive and academic progress than are the surface manifestations commonly focused on by educators. Additionally, in terms of vocabulary development, it highlights the fact that an ELL student may have the vocabulary to hold a conversation about weekend activities, but might not have the vocabulary to comprehend a science or social studies text.

4. Reading fluency, including oral reading skills

Fluency is the ability to read words accurately and quickly. Fluent readers recognize words and comprehend them simultaneously. Reading fluency is a critical factor necessary for reading comprehension. If children read out loud with speed, accuracy, and proper expression, they are more likely to comprehend and remember the material than if they read with difficulty and in an inefficient way.

Two instructional approaches have typically been used to teach reading fluency. One, guided repeated oral reading, encourages students to read passages out loud with systematic and explicit guidance and feedback from their teacher. The other, independent silent reading, encourages students to read silently on their own, inside and outside the classroom, with little guidance or feedback from their teachers.

Considerations when instructing ELLs in fluency

The Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) states that ELLs should learn to read initially in their first language. If this is not possible, students need to see and hear literally hundreds of books over a school year in order for fluency to be modeled to them. CIERA recommends that ELLs participate in read-alouds of big books, read along with proficient readers, and listen repeatedly to books read aloud in order to gain fluency in English (Hiebert et al., 1998).

The NRC complements CIERA's recommendations about initial literacy in the native language. The NRC asserts that learning to speak English first contributes to children's eventual fluency in English reading, as oral proficiency provides a foundation to support subsequent learning about the alphabetic principle through an understanding of the structure of spoken English words and of the language and content of the material they are reading (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). This reinforces the recommendation for vocabulary development in ELLs: that in addition to reading instruction, ESL or ELD instruction must be an integral part of curriculum for ELLs.

Fluency should not be confused with accent. Many ELLs will read and

speaking English with an accent as they are beginning to learn English, and others will have one throughout their lives. Students can read fluently in English with a native language accent.

5. Reading comprehension strategies

Reading comprehension is the culmination of all of the reading skills and the ultimate goal of learning to read. The purpose of mastery of each of the four previous skills is to enable comprehension. Likewise, reading comprehension facilitates mastery of the other four skills. For example, the NRP found that reading comprehension is clearly related to vocabulary knowledge and development. The NRP also found that comprehension is an active process that requires an intentional and thoughtful interaction between the reader and the text that can be explicitly taught through text comprehension instruction.

Considerations when instructing ELLs in comprehension

The NRC, in discussing reading for meaning, or comprehension, explains that the four other Reading First skills are interrelated with the skill of comprehension and also makes the case for native language literacy instruction: "The abilities to hear and reflect on the structure of spoken English words, as required for learning how the alphabetic principle works, depend on oral familiarity with the words being read. Similarly, learning to read for meaning depends on understanding the language and referents of the text to be read. To the extent possible, ELLs should have opportunities to develop literacy skills in their home language as well as in English (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 324)."

As ELLs may be working diligently to translate concepts literally, figurative language such as "crocodile tears" or "sweet tooth" can be perplexing. Hiebert et al. (1998) recommend scanning students' text beforehand to anticipate these difficulties and engaging students in a discussion about literal and figurative meanings of these expressions.

Frequently, when students are behind their peers in learning to read, as is often the case for ELLs, their remedial programs consist of phonemic awareness, phonics activities or vocabulary development in isolation. They are not exposed to authentic texts or challenged to think critically or inferentially about stories. Teachers of ELLs must expose their students to quality literature and higher order thinking skills. This can be done through the use of graphic organizers, modeling "thinking aloud," and stopping often in the text to question and summarize.

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