

**Literacy Development  
for English Language Learners:  
Classroom Challenges in the NCLB Age**

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One of the most important hallmarks of one's educational success is the development of competent reading and literacy skills. This process requires the integration of one's language skills, background knowledge, and ability to construct meaning from a variety of print materials, and for many students this process is not an easy one. For students trying to develop literacy in a language other than their native language, this process can be especially challenging. Yet many schools today are faced with helping students from different cultures and languages develop their ability to read and write in English while learning grade-specific content needed to meet state and district expectations. In this paper, background information is provided about the increasing importance of the English Language Learning (ELL) proficiency, important considerations for ELL literacy instruction, and research-based recommendations for quality literacy instruction for ELL students.

## **Shifting Demographics and NCLB Accountability**

Although the United States has long been a country of immigrants, the demographics of this country have been changing rapidly over recent years. According to data submitted by state departments of education, between 1990 and 2000 the number of limited English proficient students attending American schools rose 76%, from 2.1 million in 1990 to 3.7 million in 2000. While a number of these English language learners (ELL) achieve English fluency each year, new students lacking English fluency are entering schools annually, and the overall achievement levels of this population remain significantly lower than that of the general school population. For example, on the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Grade 4 ELL students scored an average of 32 scale score points lower than all Grade 4 students, and Grade 8 ELL students were 41 points lower than all Grade 8 students (Goldman, 2003). At both grade

levels, this represented achievement that was approximately two to three years lower than other students at the same grade.

This achievement gap has been noticed across a wide range of measures for a number of years and was the impetus for an emphasis on ELL students in the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Schools and districts nationwide are now accountable for helping “limited English proficient children meet the same challenging state academic and content and student academic achievement standards as all students are expected to meet” (NCLB, Part A, Subpart 1). States have set annual targets leading to 100 percent of the students demonstrating proficiency on expected standards by 2014; schools and districts will be deemed as needing improvement if they do not demonstrate adequate progress toward those targets each year. States are required to make public the list of schools and districts identified as needing improvement, and it is anticipated that the great majority of schools in many states will be so identified before 2014. The American Association of School Administrators has stated that currently “a vast majority of the schools have been flagged solely because of the performance of students with disabilities or with limited English” and stress the need “to target the state’s and district’s resources to (these) students who need them most” (American Association of School Administrators 2003).

## **Classroom Teachers and ELL Professional Development**

Providing adequate resources to address a growing issue in a time of competing demands is often easier said than done. High-quality language instruction programs, high-quality professional development for classroom teachers and other personnel working with ELL students, and annual assessment of ELL students’ progress toward proficiency are all expectations within this new law. The available resources to address these expectations will vary from school to school and district to district, but many schools and almost all districts will have access to federal funds that may be allocated for these purposes. For ELL, this will often mean using Title I and Title III funds to provide the services and materials that meet NCLB criteria for scientifically-based research and effectiveness (U.S. Department of Education 2001).

While many states and local districts have been actively addressing ELL education needs for a number of years, these efforts will need to be intensified in many schools across the country.

The number of ELL students has been steadily growing for years, but the resources to help classroom teachers address these students' needs have not been growing at a comparable rate. For instance, a 2003 North Central Regional Educational Lab publication reported a study showing that only 31 percent of teachers in public schools participated in ELL-related professional development during 1998, and those teachers were more likely to be teaching in schools with a more than 50 percent minority student population. A 2003 North Carolina study found a similar need when data revealed that 47 percent of classroom teachers were teaching ELL students, but only six percent had eight or more hours of training in ELL strategies within the past three years. Clearly, if the achievement gap between ELL and other students is to be closed, many more classroom teachers will need high-quality professional development on effective strategies to address ELL students' literacy development in the classroom.

## Language-Literacy Instruction for ELL Students

Language learning is a complex, non-linear process that is affected by many interrelated factors, so there is no "typical" ELL student. While more and more classrooms now have ELL students, mainstream teachers often lack fluency in a second language, and bilingual classroom help, if any, is likely to be a paraprofessional or parent. Any ELL assistance at the middle and high school levels is rare. Yet in many cases, classroom teachers will be the primary instructors to help ELL students develop competent English literacy skills. It is important then for these teachers to have a clear understandings of effective strategies to help ELL students.

Slavin and Cheung's review of the research (2004) found that literacy instructional programs that use the ELL child's native language or paired bilingual strategies for early reading instruction were deemed more effective in the majority of the studies examined. Findings such as these led the National Panel of Reading to recommend that if young children arrive at school with no proficiency in English, they should receive instruction in their native language if instructional guides and locally-proficient teachers in that language are available. If not, development in spoken English should precede beginning reading instruction (Snow 1998).

While some ELL students will arrive at school with no English-language skills, many ELL students enter school with limited language proficiency or dual language deficiency in both their

native language and English. Garcia (2000) estimated that 55 percent of the current ELL population was born in the United States, primarily to Hispanic, Asian or Native American families, and many of these children enter school with inadequate preschool literacy experiences in both languages. The schools then have the task of enriching and extending students' English language base for literacy. If schools use a basic skills approach to address these students' literacy needs, it often compounds their risk for failure since the ELL students then lack a language-rich, literacy-rich environment that exposes them to the higher-order skills expected on state standards.

Having adequate time for a student to become proficient in a second language may be ideal, but the federal law now requires that ELL students' proficiency in English be assessed annually and that Grades 3 through 8 and high school students participate in their state's reading assessments after three consecutive years' enrollment in this country's schools. Educators realize that many students will not have developed adequate English-language skills to demonstrate proficiency within that time. While proficient English oral skills can develop quickly (in as few as two years), research has confirmed that the time needed to learn to read in English is related to a student's language base and literacy skills, regardless of the language. Contrary to popular belief, age may not be the best predictor, as young children do not effortlessly learn a second language (Berman 1997). A student's proficiency in their first language is likely to be more predictive of how easily they will acquire English literacy. One study by Collier and Thomas (1997) found that students reading on grade level in their native language took four to seven years to achieve 50<sup>th</sup> percentile reading performance in English, while students schooled only in their second language generally took seven to ten years to reach that performance level.

## **Effective Approaches for ELL Literacy Development**

School success is more likely to come for ELL students if a long-term consistent approach is used across all classrooms, along with efforts to involve parents and the community. The most effective of these approaches integrates the fundamentals of English language development with appropriate high-quality instructional strategies. A variety of research sources overlap in their findings of instruction characteristics that support ELL students' literacy success. The following

chart summarizes important elements cited in a variety of ELL research and professional resources as successful educational approaches for ELL literacy learning.

<b>ELL Research Finding</b>	<b>Example Sources</b>	<b>Classroom Implications</b>
Key elements of effective reading instruction for <u>all</u> students, including vocabulary, comprehension and phonics, are also important for ELL students.	Slavin and Cheung (2004); Florida State Department of Education (2003); Fresno (2001);	Teachers need a solid grounding in the language learning and reading processes and strategies for effective reading instruction.
If the achievement gap is to be closed, ELL students must be taught the important core subject matter content expected of all students.	Solomon and Rhodes (1995); CREDE (1998); Florida State Department of Education (2003)	Reading and writing instruction can be effectively integrated throughout the school day, not just at a specifically scheduled time.
Higher order skills should be integrated with the content being taught.	CREDE (2002); Solomon and Rhodes (1995); Tharp (1997); Florida State Department of Education (2003)	Standards-based instruction requires high expectations for all students; instructional strategies need to support students reaching those expectations.
Effective instructional input must be comprehensible, in context and for a real life purpose.	Fresno (2001); Florida State Department of Education (2003); Tarone and Tedick (2000); CARLA (1998)	Teachers need to understand the concept of “comprehensible input” and how to apply this in classroom instruction.
An understanding of how second language learning works and the use of approaches tailored to the ELL levels of students supports ELL students’ achievement.	Abt-Perkins and Rosen (2000); Solomon and Rhodes (1995); Tharp (1997);	Teachers need information about English language development (ELD) levels and the instructional strategies appropriate at each level.
Culturally-informed teaching strategies are more effective with ELL students.	Slavin and Cheung (2004); CARLA (1998); Tharp (1997); Solomon and Rhodes (1995)	Teachers must be aware of how their own culture impacts their instruction as well as cultural nuances that can impact students’ English language learning.
ELL students who learn academic English as well as conversational English and who understand the structure of expository and narrative texts are more successful in school.	CARLA (1998); Peregoy, and Boyle (1997); Moss, Leone and Dipallo (1997); McLaughlin (1992); CREDE (2002); Cummins (1988)	Oral skills in English develop more easily and quickly than academic skills such as reading and writing, and a long-term, scaffolded approach to ELL instruction is needed.
Speaking-listening skills are most effectively supported through interactive methods, such as teacher-student interactive facilitation, student-teacher dialogue and instructional conversations.	CREDE (2002); CARLA (1998); Solomon and Rhodes (1995); Florida State Department of Education (2003)	A “sink or swim” approach to English is likely to frustrate both teachers and students; an understanding of specific interactive strategies can support learning for all students.

This research interfaces well with a broader set of research studies from the fields of cognitive, developmental and educational psychology and brain research. A synthesis of these studies

highlighting what we now know about how people learn was completed by the National Research Council (2000) and emphasizes conclusions such as:

- Learning builds on previous experiences (e.g., the importance of using ELL students' prior knowledge, culture, interests, and experiences in new learning);
- Learning can be positively influenced by opportunities to interact (the social nature of learning);
- Knowledge taught in a variety of contexts is more likely to support flexible transfer (e.g., the integration of ELL strategies across content areas);
- Connected, organized and relevant information supports not only remembering, but going beyond information to inferences and conclusions (e.g., contextualized instruction, teaching higher-order skills, use of certain strategies such as graphic organizers);
- Feedback and active evaluation of learning furthers student understanding and skill development; and
- Transfer of learning is an active process (e.g., active engagement of students with the content to be learned).

While the research does not confirm one best way to teach all ELL students, it does emphasize the importance of classroom teachers having a core of understandings and using a variety of effective instructional strategies to flexibly support ELL student achievement. Effective teachers will weave a literacy approach that integrates multiple factors, such as those suggested by Strickland (NCREL 2003): the construction of meaning from different perspectives, the acknowledgment of context in literacy learning, the use of language for real communication, the use of relevant literacy materials, and a focus on higher-order thinking and problem solving. Such an approach is likely not only to benefit ELL learners, but all learners with diverse needs.

## Summary

Over the past several years, rapidly-changing demographics in the United States have brought and are continuing to bring English language learning (ELL) issues to the forefront in schools throughout this country. This trend is likely to continue, meaning that still more schools and classrooms are likely to enroll ELL students in the future. The apparent achievement gap

between ELL learners and the general student population in combination with increasing state and federal accountability requirements for ELL achievement make it imperative for educators to understand and apply effective techniques to support ELL students' learning.

Literacy instruction is at the core of the ELL issue, because literacy encompasses the basic language competencies (speaking, listening, reading and writing), and reading and writing are often considered fundamental skills to one's school success. Teachers and administrators will need foundational and specific skills in understanding English language development and how that process affects classroom learning. By integrating fundamentals of English language development with an in-depth understanding of the reading process and its related strategies, classroom teachers can more effectively select and apply the instructional techniques to support ELL students' literacy learning. Classroom teachers are more likely to be effective in supporting ELL students' language and literacy development if they incorporate the following characteristics into their instructional programs:

- Demonstrate high expectations for all students by teaching the content and higher-order skills expected in the state standards;
- Provide interactive, scaffolded support to help ELL students, over time, reach state standards' expectations;
- Utilize effective research-based strategies to provide a comprehensive reading instructional program that builds on oral language skills and addresses decoding and phonics skills, vocabulary and comprehension; and
- Integrate language learning and literacy instruction across the curriculum by focusing on comprehensible input and instructional strategies appropriate for an ELL student's English proficiency level.

Classroom teachers will need access to more ELL and reading-related professional development and classroom support than has typically been available in the past in order to develop and implement these skills and strategies effectively.

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