

DIRECTIONS

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Implementing Reading First with English Language Learners

by Beth Antunez

Introduction

It is impossible to ignore the importance of literacy in education. Reading is the skill upon which success in every other academic area is based. Study after study shows that students who cannot read by age nine are unlikely to ever become fluent readers, and have a higher tendency to drop out (Moats, 1999; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Contrasting with the straightforwardness of its importance, the teaching and learning of literacy is enormously complex. The development of literacy by English language learners (ELLs) includes all of the challenges implicit in native English speakers' learning to read and write, and is additionally compounded by a diversity of linguistic, cognitive and academic variables.

Recent federal initiatives have gone to great lengths to understand and simplify the complexities of literacy teaching and learning. The Reading First (Part B, Subpart 1 of Title I of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*) legislation mandates that every kindergarten through third grade reading program contain explicit and systematic instruction in the following five areas:

- phonemic awareness;
- phonics;
- vocabulary development;
- reading fluency, including oral reading skills; and
- reading comprehension strategies.

Reading First is valuable to all educators, including those of ELLs, because it breaks down the complexities associated with learning to read and crafting a reading program into these five components that are the skills to be mastered and taught in every successful reading program. However, the linguistic, cognitive, and academic variables that compound the processes of reading for ELLs necessitate additional specific considerations and recommendations for instruction both within and outside of these five Reading First components. This document will 1) outline a brief history of the Reading First legislation; 2) synthesize broad, research-based recommendations for the effective instruction of ELLs; 3) explain each of the five Reading First components and instructional practices within that component, 4) give research-based examples and recommendations of effective instructional practices for ELLs within this component, and 5) present additional considerations for instructional planning and implementation of reading programs with ELLs.

▶ A Brief History of Reading First ◀

In 1997, Congress approved the creation of a National Reading Panel (NRP) to initiate a national, comprehensive, research-based effort on alternative instructional approaches to reading instruction and to guide the development of public policy on literacy instruction (Ramírez, 2001). Before it began its analysis of the research, the NRP reviewed the findings of a National Research Council (NRC) report, Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), which had designated three topic areas central to learning to read: Alphabeticity, Fluency, and Comprehension. After public hearings and discussion, the panel decided to focus on the following topics and subtopics for intensive study:

- Alphabeticity:
 - Phonemic Awareness
 - Phonics Instruction
- Fluency
- Comprehension:
 - Vocabulary Instruction
 - Text Comprehension Instruction
 - Teacher Preparation and Comprehension Strategies Instruction (NICHD, 2000a).

Incidentally, the NRP did not examine research studies related to second language learning and reading, nor did it address issues relevant to this topic, as a new research initiative conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and the Department of Education is underway (NICHD, 2000a). In April 2000, the NRP published its findings and recommendations in each of the topic and subtopic areas, in the

form of the Report of the National Reading Panel: Report of the Subgroups. It is from this NRP report that the Reading First legislation within Title I of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* was formulated.

Reading First mandates that schools be held accountable for ensuring that all students read by third grade. It reinforces this mandate through funding of “scientific, research-based reading programs,” which are defined as programs that include the essential components of reading instruction. Section 1208 (3) of Title I states, “The term ‘essential components of reading instruction’ means explicit and systematic instruction in—

- “(A) phonemic awareness;
- “(B) phonics;
- “(C) vocabulary development;
- “(D) reading fluency, including oral reading skills; and
- “(E) reading comprehension strategies.”

Thus, these two congressionally-mandated initiatives, the NRP report and Reading First, have aimed to quell the debate about what works in reading instruction and set into place a national reading policy.

► Reading and ELLs ◀

Study after study has demonstrated that there is a strong and positive correlation between literacy in the native language and learning English (New York State Education Department, 2000; Clay, 1993) and that the degree of children’s native language proficiency is a strong predictor of their English language development (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Literacy in a child’s native language establishes a knowledge, concept and skills base that transfers from native language reading to reading in a second language (Collier & Thomas, 1992; Cummins, 1989; Escamilla, 1987; Rodríguez, 1988).

Hiebert et al. (1998) synthesized reading research for The Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) and recommended that ELLs learn to read initially in their first language, while the National Research Council (NRC) found that, for ELLs, learning to speak English should be a priority before being taught to read English. Research supports that oral language development provides the foundation in phonological awareness and allows for subsequent learning about the alphabetic structure of English (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

The NRC’s report explains that hurrying young non-English-speaking children into reading in English without ensuring adequate preparation is counterproductive. The NRC makes a two-pronged recommendation, strongly emphasizing the importance of native language oral and, when feasible, written proficiency:

- “If language-minority children arrive at school with no proficiency in English but speaking a language for

which there are instructional guides, learning materials, and locally available proficient teachers, these children should be taught how to read in their native language while acquiring oral proficiency in English and subsequently taught to extend their skills to reading in English.

- If language-minority children arrive at school with no proficiency in English but speak a language for which the above conditions cannot be met and for which there are insufficient numbers of children to justify the development of the local capacity to meet such conditions, the initial instructional priority should be developing the children's oral proficiency in English. Although print materials may be used to support the development of English phonology, vocabulary, and syntax, the postponement of formal reading instruction is appropriate until an adequate level of oral proficiency in English has been achieved" (p. 324).

It is important to note that neither the NRP nor the resulting Reading First legislation examines or makes recommendations specific to reading instruction for ELLs, though there were 4.4 million ELL students enrolled in public schools (Pre-K through Grade 12) for the 1999-2000 school year, a number representing 9.3% of total public school student enrollment, and a 27.9% increase over the reported 1997-98 ELL enrollment (NCBE, 2002). The above-cited seminal reading research indicates that ELLs should have native language literacy and oral English proficiency before being instructed to read in English. The following 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.

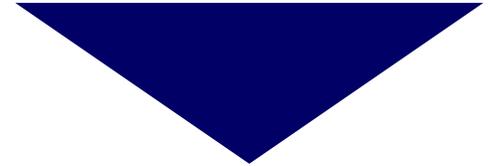
► **Five Essential Components of Reading Instruction** ◀

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.

Considerations When Instructing ELLs In Phonemic Awareness

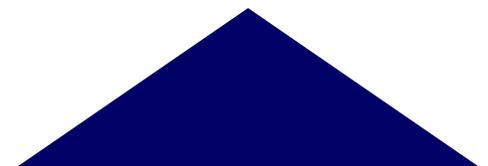
- Some phonemes may not be present in ELLs' native language and, therefore, may be difficult for a student to pronounce and distinguish auditorily, as well as to place into a meaningful context. For ELLs, as with all students, it is important that instruction have meaning, so that the words and sounds 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.



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 end 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!*



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.

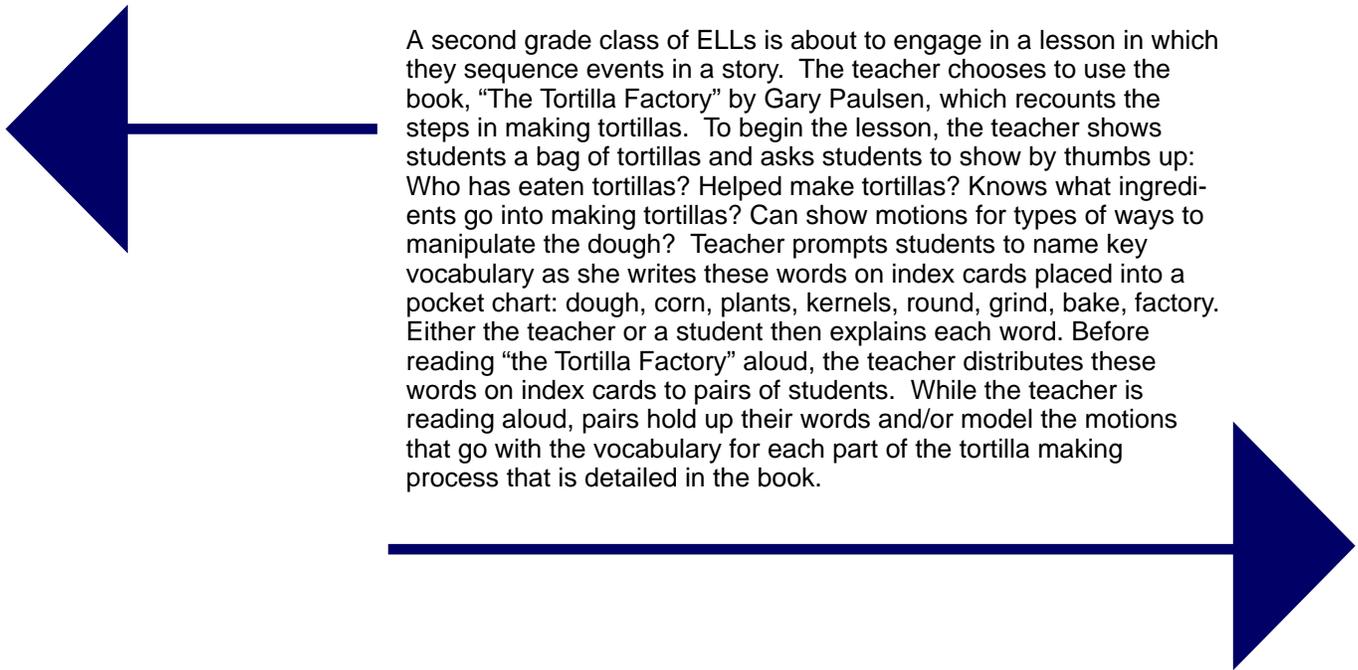
Considerations When Instructing ELLs In Vocabulary

- 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:
 - 1) through conversations, mostly with adults;
 - 2) listening to adults read to them; and
 - 3) 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 (<http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org/FAQ/faq.htm>).

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 speak 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.

► Overall Considerations for Instructional Planning and Implementation of Reading Programs with ELLs ◀

“The most salient feature of English learners as a group is their remarkable diversity” (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000, p. 237).

This publication has endeavored to highlight some of the considerations in implementing Reading First and in instructing ELLs in literacy, but it cannot be assumed that what works in teaching English literacy instruction is de facto what works in native language literacy instruction or in literacy instruction to non-native English speakers.

Reading programs must be tailored to the children the program serves and must be aligned with the goals of the local community. Before any reading program can begin, at minimum the following questions must be answered:

- What is the student’s native language?
- Does this language have a Roman alphabet? Does it have a written form?
- Can the student fluently speak, read, and write the language?
- How well does the student speak English?
- How old is the student?

Seminal research studies support students’ becoming literate in their native language before becoming literate in English. Other questions to consider include:

- Are there enough teachers to instruct students through the native language?
- Do parents understand the research on effective educational programs? Do teachers?

Reading First has the potential to become a much-appreciated piece of legislation in that it clearly delineates five components that every reading program must have and supports these components with the NRP’s recommendations. Educators want their students to be successful readers and should welcome the Reading First research and the funds to implement it. However, the teaching and learning of reading remains complex, especially for ELLs with their myriad linguistic and academic characteristics. Thus, the spirited and complex debate will continue, as educators strive to determine the best means to teach the diversity of readers in our nation.

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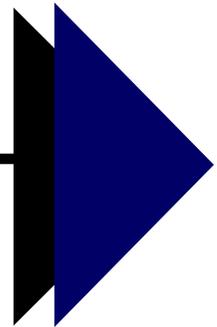
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