

**Reading in America:
Supporting English Learners in the Quest for Literacy**

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ABSTRACT

As a teacher of Second Language Learners, I am intrigued about the factors that play a role in reading and language comprehension. According to the New Mexico legislature, a Science of Reading approach should be taken when teaching students to learn and be proficient readers. This approach, I thought, would be key to helping students learn to read. However, I have learned throughout this school year that it takes more than a Science of Reading approach to help English learners reach proficiency. The research documented below details guidelines and steps teachers can take to help support this particular population as they navigate the ever changing Education system in America.

Reading in America continues to lag behind other countries yet in the world of an English learner, reading is an even bigger feat to overcome. In my recent experience as a teacher of English to Second Language Learners, I have wondered how and when English Learners can ever attain proficiency in Literacy when facing the challenges and dynamics of learning a second language in the American classroom. As the population of English learners rises, it becomes even more pressing to probe: What is the key to not only bridging the academic gap, but really providing English learners the means to succeed among their peers?

In *Foundations for Teaching English Language Learners*, Wright (2019) documents the research done by three separate entities and their findings in regards to language and literacy development among ELLs (p. 196). Such findings are found in the NLP report (August & Shanahan, 2006a, 2006b; August et al., 2014), the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005, 2006), as well as the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2017). Through these guidelines, teachers who want to make a difference can reflect on their practices to better reach their ELL population.

One of the findings confirms that literacy and language programs and instruction currently in place are not doing enough for ELLs in terms of acquiring phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and text comprehension skills. And even when English Learners do learn the skills to decode words, their oral language and comprehension skills still fall behind that of their peers who are proficient in English (p. 197). How to achieve high quality Language Arts instruction in the classroom is still up to debate. Nevertheless, the NLP report states the following “*for ELLs to receive the maximum benefit from instruction, in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension, the instruction should be adapted to their*

unique needs” (p. 196). Meanwhile, the research continues to evolve on whether a meaning based or a code based approach is best when learning to read.

The next finding places necessary emphasis on oral language development in order to develop literacy skills. While it is crucial to attain decoding skills at the word level, ELLs still fall behind that of their English native speaking peers when it comes to making meaning from the text. *“All three reports conclude that students with well developed oral skills in English achieve greater success in English reading than students with less- developed skills”* (p. 197).

In addition to oral language development, a quality ESL program is absolutely necessary through the instruction of oral language. According to Wright, *“the National Academies found that the failure of elementary schools to provide instruction that appropriately addresses the linguistic, cultural, socioemotional, and academic needs of ELLs leads to their lack of progress”* (p.197). The studies also found that *“Oral proficiency and literacy in the first language is an advantage for literacy development in English”* (p. 197). In my opinion, this finding supports the implementation of the two way dual program, in states like Texas and New Mexico, where the ELL population is increasing. In a Dual (two-way, 50-50) program, students learn skills in English while still utilizing their native language. This is what experts refer to as an *additive* not *subtractive* approach to attaining English proficiency and the best approach to learning a second language (Lightbown, Spada, 2017).

Another key factor in supporting ELLs in their English development is to get to know the students individually. Many things can factor into their success- like their abilities, knowledge, and background (Wright, 2019, p. 198). Essentially, knowing more about what my students are faced with and have at their disposal, will in turn enable me to reach out and target those areas of need and build on their strengths.

Which ties in to the next guideline- that assessments in English education are not quite up to par with assessing what is really going on for ELLs. Many times we have heard, as teacher teaching literacy, that phonemic awareness is an indicator for reading success in later grades (Kazakoff, Macaruso, Hook, 2017). While that may be true for some, research has shown that ELLs benefit more from using their native language to read, write, and speak (Werblow, Duesbery, Koulidobrova, 2019). An English only approach has been debunked for many reasons and they do not necessarily help students close the achievement gap (Thomas, Collier, 2003).

This next guideline is one that may surprise some, even when we have the best of intentions. It is that of the home language making the biggest impact on an ELLs literacy development (Wright, 2019, p. 198). One such analysis looked into home language and literacy practices among bilingual students in a multilingual environment. It found that even though English comprehension levels were not *directly* increased by home language and a healthy literacy environment, home language and literacy environments did affect the vocabulary and morphological awareness in students in such a way that reading comprehension also improved as a result (Relyea, Zhang, Liu, Wui, 2019).

One last guideline noted by the CREDE, NEP, and Academies looks at the type of ELL instruction most beneficial for learning. The CREDE report recommends teachers use an interactive approach to learning, in addition to direct and explicit instruction. According to Wright, an interactive approach in the classroom “*emphasizes learning mediated through interaction with other learners or more competent readers and writers*” (p. 199). As teachers, we can achieve an interactive approach by differentiating the content, process, product, or environment for our students.

All of these guidelines begin a blueprint for addressing the literacy shortfall that our ELLs face in the American classroom. How do we, as teachers, go about rectifying our methods to aid ELLs for success? The recommendations listed below are supported by the Institute of Education Sciences and can be used as a starting point (Wright, 2019). They are as follows: 1). Teach a set of academic vocabulary words...using a variety of instructional activities. 2). Integrate oral and written English language instruction into content-area teaching. 3). Provide regular, structured opportunities to develop written language skills. 4). Provide small group instructional intervention to students struggling in areas of literacy and English language development (p. 199). In addition to these recommendations, the National Academies report also suggest the following:

Provide explicit instruction in literacy components.

Screen for language and literacy challenges and monitor progress.

Develop reading and writing abilities of ELLs through text based, analytical instruction using a cognitive strategies approach.

Provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction.

Provide opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation.

Foster student motivation and engagement in literacy learning.

On top of these recommendations, teachers must abide by the Common Core State Standards. Chapter 8 lists many strategies to implement with students day in and day out- strategies that support CCSS in Reading nonfiction and literature text. Teachers may be using the appropriate strategies to teach Reading, but it is necessary to know how to differentiate these strategies for ELL students, who do not learn like the rest of their peers. This is where I reflect as a teacher of Second Language Learners. So despite policies like No Child Left Behind and the ever present

achievement gap, the studies are promising for EL students learning to be proficient English readers. By utilizing their knowledge about language and providing them with intentional support and a rich academic environment, English learners can be proficient readers.

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