

# Teaching Reading to Early Language Learners

*Recent research offers insights into effective strategies for helping young English-language learners develop reading skills.*

**Russell Gersten and Esther Geva**

In the past decade, researchers have increasingly turned their attention to studying how young English learners develop language and literacy skills, with a special focus recently on reading development. Some of the research findings have particular relevance for teaching reading to English learners in the primary grades.

## Similar Paths to Reading

The latest research indicates that both English learners and native speakers of English take similar paths of development in such prereading skills as phonological awareness. The research also suggests that we can distinguish between limited English skills and learning disabilities in young children.

## Phonological Awareness

Awareness of speech sounds plays an important role in reading development. Many studies in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom (Adams, 1990; Ehri, 1991; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) have shown that instruction in phonological awareness enhances growth in reading and spelling.

A less well-known finding is that the awareness of individual speech sounds in one's native language correlates with the awareness of individual speech sounds in a second language. Phonological awareness in Spanish or Korean, for

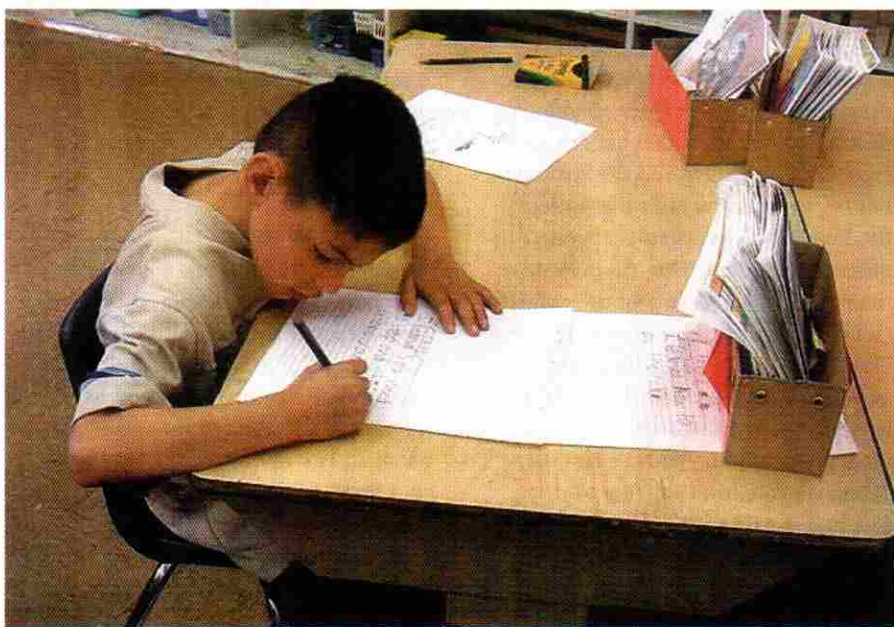


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example, transfers to phonological awareness in English. This awareness can also predict reading and spelling development in both languages, even when the two languages are very different from each other—for example, Punjabi-English, Farsi-English, English-Hebrew, French-English, English-Spanish, and English-Chinese (Geva & Wang, 2001).

Each language has different phonological characteristics, of course, and English learners may encounter specific difficulties related to their home language (Fashola, Drum, Mayer, & Kang, 1996; Wang & Geva, in press),

especially during the initial learning phases. These difficulties are fairly predictable, however, and should lead to proactive teaching that focuses on potentially problematic sounds and letter combinations. In fact, new research suggests that with appropriate instruction, English learners can learn phonological awareness and decoding skills in English as rapidly as native English speakers can (Geva, 2000; Thompson, Vaughn, Hickman-Davis, & Kouzekanani, 2003).

In a study of spelling development, a group of children whose native language was Cantonese and a comparison group

of native English-speaking children developed spelling skills at the same pace from the beginning of grade 1 to the end of grade 2. Specific spelling errors made by the Cantonese group—such as a difficulty distinguishing the sounds /th/ and /s/ in *think* and *sink*—disappeared by 2nd grade (Wang & Geva, in press). A longitudinal study involving 131 English learners and 727 native English speakers concluded that “the acquisition of basic literacy skills for children from both language groups developed in a similar fashion” (Chiappe, Siegel, & Wade-Woolley, 2002, p. 369).

### **Detecting Learning Disabilities in English Learners**

Historically, educators have had difficulty distinguishing reading disabilities from limited English proficiency (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Research suggests, however, that it is possible to validly screen English learners for learning disabilities in kindergarten and 1st grade even when children’s oral language skills in English are still developing. Assessing letter-naming fluency and phonological skills early in 1st grade can predict moderately well the English learners’ future reading achievement—word reading, oral reading fluency, and comprehension (Baker, Gersten, Haager, Goldenberg, & Dingle, in preparation; Chiappe et al., 2002; Gersten & Baker, 2003; Geva, 2000). These results suggest that if children have received appropriate and systematic literacy instruction in English, such assessments to ascertain those at risk for reading failure are appropriate. One of the practical outcomes of this research is that it may no longer be ethically justifiable to withhold assessment and intensive early intervention from



English learners who show early warning signs of a reading disability.

Despite limited research on effective interventions for helping English learners read in a second language (August & Hakuta, 1997; Gersten & Baker, 2003; Rousseau, Tam, & Ramnarain, 1993), the similar paths of phonological awareness suggest that we can extrapolate from research with native speakers to find some helpful strategies. For example, Scarborough’s (2001) finding of a link between oral language comprehension and subsequent reading comprehension for native English speakers suggests that instruction in both listening and reading comprehension strategies is particularly important for English learners. Our observational research also found that high-quality vocabulary instruction aids reading comprehension and that a combination of defining new words, using them in class discussions, and writing sentences and stories appears to be optimal.

### **Observational Research on Effective Instruction**

For two years, we observed 34 1st grade classrooms in which at least three-fourths of the students were English learners (Baker et al., in preparation; Gersten & Baker, 2003; Graves & Gersten, 2002; Haager, Gersten, Baker, & Graves, in press). Teachers followed the California state standards, which were developed on the basis of the National Reading Panel’s report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Most teachers used a basal series with an accompanying series of children’s literature, and about one-fourth used a literature-based approach aligned to the state standards. All instructors taught reading and language arts exclusively in English. Teachers and their assistants were free to use students’ native languages to clarify material, but they rarely did so. Reading and language arts instruction lasted at least two and one-

half hours each day.

The standards provide clear guidelines about how and for how long to teach reading but only offer general guidelines on how to adjust lessons for English learners. Because of this lack of specific guidance, we saw a good deal of natural variation in how teachers adapted their instructional strategies to the needs of English learners.

Our goal was to link specific instructional strategies to reading growth among English learners. We assessed students on valid predictors of subsequent reading performance—letter naming and phonemic awareness—at the beginning of the year, and on comprehension as well as fluency and accuracy at the year's end. After identifying classes in which the average performance of the English learners was at or above levels considered acceptable benchmarks for 1st grade, we used factor analysis, a statistical technique, to explore which good instructional practices—what we called *facets of instruction*—had recurring patterns across these classrooms.

In addition to our qualitative field notes, we quantified what we observed using a 7-point Likert scale for a list of 29 teaching strategies that we derived and developed from three sources: observational research on beginning reading (Anderson, Evertson, & Brophy, 1979; Foorman, Francis, Shaywitz, Shaywitz, & Fletcher, 1997; Stallings & Kaskowitz, 1974); research on English-language instruction for English learners (Tikunoff et al., 1991); and the National Research Panel's research synthesis on components of effective beginning reading programs (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). The scale represented how well the strategy was used; low scores represented either ineffective or nonuse of the technique.



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Using our factor analysis, we identified six facets of instruction (see p. 47) that predicted student growth in reading—in both reading comprehension and reading fluency and accuracy. Although the individual coefficients varied from the first to the second year of the study, our key finding was that all six facets of instruction contributed to reading growth. If this pattern recurs in other observational research, educators will better understand how to teach reading effectively to English learners in the primary grades.

During classroom observations, we also took open-ended field notes to capture specific examples of practices that appeared to be particularly effective, and we examined notes each year from the four classes with the strongest reading growth in order to articulate themes. Although each teacher had a different style of teaching, several common attributes showed up in our study (Baker et al., in preparation;

Gersten & Baker, 2003).

A major finding from the quantitative scores on the rating scale and our qualitative field notes was that these effective teachers, unlike many of their colleagues, used most of the strategies in our 29-item, research-based framework. The only area that showed inconsistency was reading fluency practice.

### ***Embedding Phonological Awareness with Writing***

Effective teachers systematically built skills in phonological awareness and decoding throughout the morning. Their lesson segments were typically brief and lively and often included review. Teachers also helped reinforce phonological and word-attack skills as students were reading.

A pleasant surprise was the emphasis that these teachers placed on writing. Teachers had students write frequently

and used writing to enhance and reinforce emerging phonological and word analysis skills. The writing activities for students in many of the high-growth classes ranged from taking dictation and using new vocabulary in workbooks to working on semantic webs and generating stories about their personal lives. In one class, students wrote half a page a day about anything—a class trip, an event at home, a story that the child was reading independently, or a story that the class was reading. Students seemed to love taking dictation, which suggests that students, too, viewed writing as a means to reinforce and demonstrate their knowledge of phonics.

### ***Infusing Lessons with Vocabulary Development***

The effective teachers emphasized vocabulary and language, and they integrated vocabulary development with other lessons. Teachers focused on rich

and evocative words (*thump, valley*) and on words essential for understanding a story. But they also highlighted basic words that a 1st grade native speaker would not necessarily need to learn. For example, while reading a story about a valley, one teacher used hand gestures to focus students' attention on the illustrations of the valley but also asked questions to reinforce the meanings of simpler words like *high, low, higher, and lower*. Most teachers relied on books or pictures to teach vocabulary, but one teacher acted out word meanings, getting down on the floor to demonstrate rabbits *thumping* and even doing a somersault to define that word.

Teachers asked students to define words, to use words in sentences, and sometimes to answer sophisticated questions involving those words. (Students often came up with interesting definitions, such as "a warren is like an apartment for rabbits.") Few

vocabulary activities required a good deal of preparation or imagination, but we found that effective teachers' strategies corroborated the research on high-quality vocabulary instruction (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982; Biemiller, 2001; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) and that students whose teachers included high-quality vocabulary instruction in their reading lessons had better reading skills.

Teachers developed individual styles for focusing on vocabulary. Some of them integrated vocabulary instruction with phonological awareness activities, whereas others used pictures from big books. But teachers invariably focused on vocabulary instruction several different times during the morning.

During this time, teachers did not stress proper grammar and syntax. For example, when a student with limited English proficiency said, "Potato is big," the teacher integrated his attempt into

the group discussion. She paraphrased the student's idea in a more sophisticated, grammatically correct fashion, but made a point of including the idea.

Not only did infusing vocabulary activities provide natural and structured breaks from the abstract phonemic awareness activities, but it also fostered an exciting pace and rhythm to the lesson and provided a cognitively challenging task that students could participate in at many different levels. (Gersten & Baker, 2003, p. 102)

The teachers with high student growth in reading—that is, English learners reading at acceptable levels for native English speakers—had a good sense of the appropriate length of literacy activities for 6-year-olds and did not stretch out any activity for too long, especially independent seatwork. Several teachers alternated complex and demanding activities, such as developing a concept map, with well-defined

## Six Successful Reading Instruction Strategies for 1st Grade English Learners

### Explicit Teaching

- Models skills and strategies
- Makes relationships overt
- Emphasizes distinctive features of new concepts
- Provides prompts
- Uses appropriate length of time for literacy activities
- Adjusts own use of English during lesson

### English Learning

- Uses visuals or manipulatives to teach content
- Provides explicit instruction in English
- Encourages students to give elaborate responses
- Uses gestures and facial expressions to teach vocabulary and clarify meaning of content

### Phonemic Awareness and Decoding

- Provides systematic instruction in phonemic awareness
- Provides systematic instruction in letter-sound correspondence
- Provides systematic instruction in decoding

### Vocabulary Development

- Teaches difficult vocabulary prior to and during lesson
- Structures opportunities to speak English
- Provides systematic instruction for developing vocabulary
- Engages students in meaningful interactions about text

### Interactive Teaching

- Secures and maintains student attention during lesson
- Maximizes extent to which students are on task during literacy activities
- Selects and incorporates students' responses, ideas, examples, and experiences into lesson
- Gives students time to respond to questions

### Instruction Geared Toward Low Performers

- Achieves high level of response accuracy
- Ensures quality of independent practice
- Engages in ongoing monitoring of student understanding and performance
- Elicits responses from all students
- Modifies instruction for students as needed
- Provides extra instruction, practice, and review
- Asks questions to ensure comprehension

## Teachers used writing to enhance and reinforce emerging phonological and word analysis skills.

activities, such as spelling, dictation, practice on sounds, and defining words. The number and variety of activities were impressive.

These teachers enhanced their systematic instruction of phonological awareness and word reading with their approaches to reading comprehension. Although each taught comprehension in a different way, all stressed an understanding of both the material that students read and what teachers read to them. They also successfully used reading as a vehicle for language development by emphasizing vocabulary for English learners. Subsequent research should document and verify the efficacy

of these teaching strategies, yet our research shows that some viable strategies are already available for enhancing reading growth in English learners. ■

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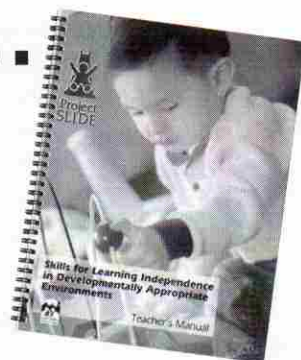
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