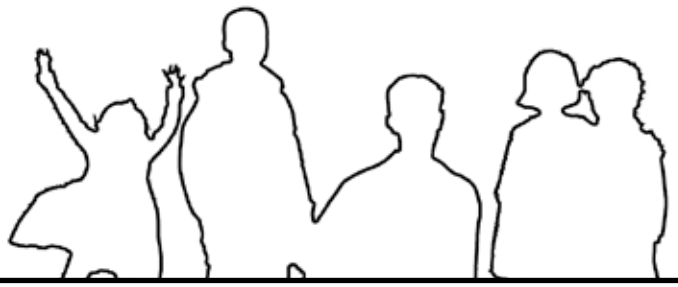
In the STARlight



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The Development of Literacy in Second-Language Learners

- Key Points
- Implications
- Resources

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In the STARlight

The Development of Literacy in Second-Language Learners: Key Findings from the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth and Instructional Implications[1]

Key Points

This edition of Starlight is based on a report of the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth entitled *Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners*. The report is the culmination of a process that began in the spring of 2002, when the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences staff selected a panel of thirteen experts in second-language development, cognitive development, curriculum and instruction, assessment, and methodology to review the quantitative and qualitative research on the development of literacy in language-minority students. These experts formed the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth.

Development of Literacy

An important finding is that by and large, for language-minority children, word-level components of literacy (e.g., decoding, spelling) either are or can be (with appropriate instruction) at levels equal to those of their monolingual peers. However, this is not the case for text-level skills, like reading comprehension, which rarely approach the levels achieved by their monolingual peers. Findings also suggest that oral language skills are an important dimension of literacy development. Although phonological processing appears to play more of a role than second-language oral proficiency on word-level reading skills, having well-developed second-language oral proficiency is associated with well-developed text-level skills such as reading comprehension.

The Role of First-Language Literacy in Second-Language Literacy Development

There is ample research evidence that certain components of second-language literacy development (e.g., word and pseudo-word reading, cognate vocabulary, reading comprehension, reading strategies, spelling, and writing) are related in important ways to performance on similar components in the first language and that well-developed literacy skills in the first language can facilitate second-language literacy development to some extent.

Also, studies comparing English only instruction to primary language instruction show that English Learners taught in their home language and in English perform better, on average, than English Learners instructed only in their second language when measuring English reading.

Classroom and School Factors

Unfortunately, there are very few experimental studies that examine the development of literacy in language-minority students; thus research has failed to provide a very complete answer to what constitutes high-quality literacy instruction for these students. However, what is evident from the existing research is that—as is true for language-majority students—focusing instruction on key components, such as phonemic awareness, decoding, oral reading fluency, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and writing, yields clear benefits. Some of the instructional research shows that enhanced teaching of these various elements provided an advantage to second-language learners. The more complex programs that were studied typically tried to teach several of these elements simultaneously and were also usually successful.

Another important finding is that successful instructional approaches do not improve the literacy skills of second-language learners as much as they do those of first-language learners. Thus, to learn literacy with maximum success, students need to have command of the kinds of literacy skills and strategies emphasized in these studies, as well as sufficient knowledge of oral English. It is not enough to teach reading skills alone, but instruction must teach these component skills while fostering extensive oral English language development. That the oral English development provided in most programs is insufficient can be seen in studies that have revealed the success of many second-language learners in developing word recognition, spelling, and decoding skills while continuing to lag behind their first-language peers in reading comprehension and vocabulary. The more promising of the complex literacy instruction routines that have been studied (such as "instructional conversations") provide instructional support of oral language development in English, along with high-quality instruction in literacy skills and strategies.

The studies reviewed also suggest that, in addition to developing oral English proficiency, some adjustments to the common instructional routines are beneficial. Although the nature of such adjustments needs to be explored more directly in future research, studies suggest the importance of considering appropriate ways of using the native language within instructional routines. They also point to the advisability of altering curriculum coverage depending on the similarity between English and the native language and the students' levels of attainment of their native language (e.g., some letter–sound correspondences do not need to be re-taught if already mastered in a native language that shares these correspondences with English), and of fine-tuning instructional routines to take into consideration students' level of English proficiency. For example, the adjustments might include (a) identifying and clarifying difficult words and passages within texts to facilitate the development of comprehension; (b) consolidating text knowledge through summarization; and (c) giving students extra practice in reading words, sentences, and stories. Some studies also revealed the value of instructional routines that include giving attention to vocabulary, checking comprehension, presenting ideas clearly both verbally and in writing, paraphrasing students' remarks and encouraging them to expand on those remarks, providing redundancy, and using physical gestures and visual cues to clarify meaning.

Findings from studies of classrooms and schools designated as effective identify attributes related to positive student outcomes. While there is a need for experimental investigation into the ultimate effectiveness of these approaches, they indicate that, to a great extent, the attributes overlap with those of effective schools for native English speakers, such as implicit and explicit challenging of students, active involvement of all students, providing activities that students can complete successfully, and scaffolding instruction for students through such techniques as building and clarifying student input and using visual organizers, teacher mediation/feedback to students, and classroom use of collaborative/cooperative learning. In many cases, however, there are techniques related to second-language acquisition such as sheltered English and respect for cultural diversity. For example, the SIOP model was explicitly developed for second-language learners and "... offers a framework for teachers to present curricular concepts to English-language learners through strategies and techniques that make new information comprehensible to the students. While doing so, teachers develop students' language skills across the domains of reading, writing, listening, and speaking." (Echevarría & Short, 2006, p. 201)

Despite the importance of teaching, there were very few studies (5) that focused on professional development. The results demonstrate that creating change in teachers is a time-consuming process that requires considerable investment on the part of the change agents, as well as the teachers. The professional development efforts studied took place over extended periods (1–3 years); all involved many meetings and workshops or an intensive summer program; and, in some cases, follow-up in classrooms. In addition, outside collaborators with expertise (university researchers) assisted. The studies indicate that, consistent with previous findings, teachers found professional development to be most helpful when it provided opportunities for hands-on practice, with teaching techniques readily applicable to their classroom, in-class demonstrations with their own or a colleague's students, or more personalized coaching. Other means to improve the quality of teaching included collaboration between special education teachers and resource specialists.

Finally, several studies show the progress schools can achieve by having staff work together to address specific school issues. These studies highlight the importance of mobilizing staff to focus on the needs of language-minority students, even when the students are few in number, and provide evidence that a concerted school effort involving outside agents (researchers and specialists) and school personnel (principals, specialists, and classroom teachers) can make a difference in student outcomes. One study (Au and Mason, 1983) highlights the importance of supporting teacher change and the need for support systems that are intensive, elaborate, and enduring to accomplish this goal. Two critical tools in supporting teacher change were a classroom implementation checklist and grade-appropriate benchmarks used to assess student progress.

Individual Factors

It is critical to keep in mind that language-minority students are a highly heterogeneous group, and that instruction must be designed to take such differences into account. Students' development of literacy is influenced by a range of individual factors, including age of arrival in a new country, educational history, socioeconomic status (SES), cognitive capacity, interests, and concerns.

This point is highlighted by the differential effects of instruction on students with differing levels of English proficiency. Students are less able to take advantage of interventions geared to promote incidental learning (learning in which there is no explicit teaching such as Silent Sustained Reading) in English if the materials (e.g., text or videos) are beyond their English proficiency levels. Moreover, teaching students strategies of various types is not as effective for students who do not have the requisite levels of language proficiency.

Implications

- Focusing instruction on key components of literacy, such as phonemic awareness, decoding, oral reading fluency, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and writing, has clear benefits.
- Given that English-language learners have more difficulty acquiring text-level skills, efforts to build their comprehension and writing should be targeted intensively throughout the years of schooling.
- The need to develop stronger English language proficiency in concert with literacy argues for an early, ongoing, and intensive effort to develop this proficiency. The oral proficiency skills associated with reading comprehension include vocabulary knowledge, listening comprehension, syntactic skills, and the ability to handle meta-linguistic aspects of language (such as providing definitions of words).
- The studies reviewed also suggest that, in addition to developing oral English proficiency, other adjustments to the common instructional routines are beneficial. While the research provides some insights into what these adjustments might be, the nature and strength of such adjustments need to be explored more directly in future research.
- Given the relationship between first- and second-language literacy skills and the benefits of bilingual instruction in developing English literacy, bilingual approaches should be considered as one good avenue for developing English literacy skills.
- Teachers should consider individual differences when planning instruction for language minority students. These students are not a homogeneous group, but differ in many ways including age of arrival in a new country, educational history, socioeconomic status (SES), cognitive capacity, interests, and concerns. The importance of considering such factors is highlighted by the finding that levels of English proficiency in individual children influence the success of instructional approaches.
- Given the limited amount of research on best methods for instructing second-language learners, the individual differences inherent in this group of learners, and the multiplicity of contexts in which these students are educated, it is important that districts, schools, and teachers assess second language learners to determine what skills and knowledge are lacking and whether interventions designed to build these skills and knowledge are effective.

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[1]Excerpts of this document are from August, D. & Shanahan, T. (Eds.) (2006). *Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learner* and are used with the permission of Lawrence Erlbaum Associates:

August, D. & Shanahan, T. Introduction and Methodology (pp. 1; 13-18)

August, D. & Shanahan, T. Synthesis: Instruction and Professional Development(pp. 353-359)

Questions for Reflection

1. How well does your school or district cover the six essential components of literacy, including phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing? What is the research base for the school-wide and instructional practices that are used?

2. What modifications does your school or district make to literacy instruction that is effective with monolingual speakers to make it more appropriate for second-language learners? What additional modifications might be used to make instruction more appropriate for these students? In responding, make sure you consider how you might build on first language literacy if students are literate in their first language, ensure students comprehend the text they are listening to or reading, and develop students oral English proficiency in the context of literacy instruction.

3. The experimental research literature does not do a good job of describing methods for differentiating instruction for second-language learners who are educated in heterogeneous classrooms. Given your knowledge of the research literature on teaching the component skills of literacy and you experience with heterogeneous classrooms, how would you differentiate instruction for these students?

4. Changes made at the school or district level can make it easier for classroom teachers to do a better job of building literacy in second language learners. What school- or district-level changes might help teachers ensure second-language learners develop solid literacy skills? Examples might include creating a center for newcomers, finding ways to encourage interaction between first and second language learners to help second language learners acquire oral language proficiency, establishing a school- or district-wide committee to assess how various groups of English-language learners are progressing and making programmatic changes where necessary.

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