

A Review Of the Literature on ESL Students with Limited First Language (L1) Literacy Skills



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INTRODUCTION

There is general agreement that instruction in the L1 is beneficial and that transfer of literacy skills almost always occurs to the L2. However, the following research studies looked at the question of how to deal with students whose L1 skills were not in written languages or who have limited or no literacy skills in their L1 and were attempting to acquire literacy skills in English.

To illustrate this, conclusions are extrapolated from Rickford J. (1998). Rickford is an expert in the field of ebonics the popular name given to Afro-American Vernacular English (AAVE). AAVE is a dialect spoken by a definable group of people who have often been identified as at-risk in the education system. Their literacy skills in Standard English often lag behind grade norms. The attempts to change this in the school system have not been very successful. In spite of additional support in literacy, the students' reading skills in the standard dialect lag behind. Rickford discusses an innovative program that introduced literacy skills to these students via

AAVE. Materials were created in AAVE and students were taught to read using them. The study reported that those students who were taught to read with AAVE materials were able to transfer those skills and enhance their standard dialect literacy skills. Previous studies had shown that attempts to teach the AAVE speakers to read via standard dialect texts were unsuccessful.

The extrapolation of this study is that students who have full L1 spoken proficiency but no literacy skills in their L1 could still profit from being taught how to read with materials created to represent their L1. The expectation is that these literacy skills transfer to their L2 (English).

The treatment of problems in literacy is a complex issue that involves linguistic, sociolinguistic and economic factors. Gordon Wells (1986) in *The Meaning Matters* notes that literacy is not just related to cognitive properties of an individual but also to the economic environment in which they exist. Therefore, any attempt to bring about a change in an individual's literacy will also have to acknowledge these broader concerns, which is not an easy task.

REFERENCES

August D, Carlo, M., Dressler, C., & Snow, C. (2005). The critical role of vocabulary development for English language learners *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 20 (1), 50–57.

This article discusses the importance of vocabulary development and outlines several methods that may be effective in improving the vocabulary of young ESL students who are typically disadvantaged when it comes to English vocabulary. The article encourages teachers to make use of the child's first language such as drawing on cognates to ensure that the child is aware of the meaning of basic vocabulary items before moving on, and to constantly review vocabulary items that have been previously covered. The difficulties in encouraging the development of English vocabulary in ESL students is then discussed.

Chiappe P Siegel, L.S Wade-Woolley L (2002). Linguistic diversity and the development of reading skills: A longitudinal study. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 6 (4), 369–400.

The purpose of this study was to examine whether the same component processes are involved in reading acquisition for students with varying levels of proficiency in English in Kindergarten and the first grade. Three basic research questions informed this study.

- Do basic literacy and reading-related skills differ as a function of proficiency levels in English?

Specifically, do native speaking students and linguistically diverse students show similar growth in decoding, spelling and oral language skills in English through Kindergarten and the first grade?

- Do the cognitive and linguistic profiles of students who speak English as a second language and native English-speaking students differ in significant ways?
- Do the same cognitive, language and literacy-related skills predict first-grade reading performance for native speaking students and ESL students?

The performance of 858 students was examined on tasks assessing basic literacy skills, phonological processing, verbal memory and syntactic awareness. There were 727 students who were native English speakers (NS students) and 131 students who spoke English as a second language (ESL students). Although ESL students performed more poorly than NS students on most measures of phonological and linguistic processing in Kindergarten and first grade, the acquisition of basic literacy skills for students from both language groups developed in a similar manner. Furthermore, alphabetic knowledge and phonological processing were important contributors to early reading skills for students from both language groups. Therefore, children learning English may acquire literacy skills in English in a similar manner to NS students, although their alphabetic knowledge may precede and facilitate the acquisition of phonological awareness in English.

The results of this study point to similarities between the cognitive development of reading skills in ESL and first language students. This seems to provide evidence for Cummins' linguistic

interdependence hypothesis, which suggests that there is a significant relationship between students' skills in acquiring native and foreign languages. The relationship between phonological awareness and reading acquisition would be similar for students learning to read in their native language and children learning to read in a foreign language. The same underlying skills of letter knowledge, spelling and phonological processing were strongly related to word reading in English for all students. Therefore, the same instructional methods can foster the development of decoding and spelling for students from a wide range of language backgrounds.

Crandall, J Bernache, C., & Prager, S. (1998). New frontiers in educational policy and program development: The challenge of the under schooled immigrant secondary school student. *Educational Policy*, 12 (6), 719–734.

This article discusses ESL students who have limited prior schooling. It suggests that students with limited prior schooling need something other than typical ESL programs. Under schooled immigrant students face the double challenge of acquiring English and literacy at the same time as they are trying to compensate for years of lost education. Students enrolled in appropriate, specialized programs may need only two or three years to catch up to their peers. Furthermore, except for ESL or bilingual teachers, few teachers have had any special preparation for teaching English language learners, and even ESL or bilingual teachers are unlikely to have had any special preparation for teaching under schooled secondary school students since teaching ESL to non-literate secondary school learners has not been a part of teacher preparation programs. Compounding the difficulties that these students face are rising graduation requirements with an increasing number of credits in fewer subject matter choices, increasingly prevalent use of standardized tests or other high school assessments including graduation and, in some cases, participating in mandated community service. These add substantially to what under schooled secondary school students must accomplish within a very limited time.

Dickinson, D. K., McCabe, A., Clark Chiarelli, N, & Wolf, A. (2004). Cross language transfer of phonological awareness in low-income Spanish and English bilingual preschool children. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 25 (3), 323–347.

The paper describes the development of phonological awareness, which has been shown to play an important role in the development of reading skills, of preschoolers in Spanish-speaking homes. Both English phonological awareness and English letter identification have been shown to be important factors when learning to read. A strong start in these areas is extremely important in ensuring future success. A lack of such abilities has been used to account for the low reading levels and high dropout rates of high school Hispanics. Although these problems manifest themselves in later grades, earlier studies have found that these problems stem from learning that occurs at an earlier age. This study looked at 123 Spanish-speaking preschoolers. Their abilities were assessed using the Peabody Picture Identification test and the early phonological awareness profile that were both conducted in Spanish and English. The emergent literacy profile was then conducted in the child's stronger language. It was found that phonological awareness in one language was correlated with phonological awareness in the other language. Based on the results of these tests, the authors conclude that bilingualism is not a disadvantage for children who are acquiring literacy and suggest that the bilingualism of these children be encouraged at school and in the home.

Early literacy and the ESL learner: Participants' manual for early childhood educators working with children from language backgrounds other than English. (1998). Adelaide, SA: Department of Education, Training and Employment.

This manual represents a collection of materials used in a course offered by the Australian Department of Education to in-service teachers working with young students for whom English is not their first language. While the materials are designed specifically for the Australian context, they can be adapted for teacher training anywhere in the world or for teaching young students in

any context. The materials are aimed at promoting teacher awareness of the social reality many young nonnative English-speaking students face and emphasize the maintenance of the students' home languages for learning English and for maintaining personal and cultural identity. The manual includes the following modules:

- supporting ESL students in early childhood settings
- developing additional language in a supportive learning environment
- talking and learning in a second language
- reading and writing in a second language
- using a culturally inclusive approach to early childhood education.

The manual also includes worksheets and exercises to use with students from language backgrounds other than English.

Goldstein, B. A. (2006). Clinical implications of research on language development and disorders in bilingual children. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 26 (4), 305–321.

Goldstein reviews several past studies that examine theories of language development in bilingual children and provide assessment models for determining phonological, lexical and syntactical development. These baselines can be used to determine whether a bilingual student has a language disorder that requires treatment or if an apparent lack of language ability is a result of the bilingual nature of the student's language. Goldstein emphasizes that students may have difficulties with certain tasks in one language while showing proficiency in the same task in their other language. Goldstein then moves on to look at studies that have focused on bilingual students with language disorders and determined that these students are not at an increased risk of specific language impairment, nor are their errors significantly different from those of the monolinguals.

It is suggested that the assessment and intervention of bilingual individuals suspected of having specific language impairment be done in both languages.

Graves, A.W., Gersten R., & Haager D. (2004). Literacy instruction in multiple-language first-grade classrooms: Linking student outcomes to observed instructional practice. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 19 (4), 262–272.

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the literacy practices in multiple-language first-grade classrooms and to explore the relationship between observed teaching practice and students' growth in reading. The researchers' goals were to:

- examine the relationship between the quality of literacy practices in first-grade classrooms and growth in oral reading fluency for the students taught by using the Good & Kaminski (2002) benchmarks as a means for classifying students into categories related to future “at-risk” status
- explore the percentage of students subsequently labelled with learning disabilities and examine their oral reading fluency growth in first grade
- describe practices in classrooms rated as high quality to suggest methods that might be useful in teaching English language learners to read in a second language.

This study examined literacy instruction in 14 first-grade classrooms of English language learners in three schools in a large urban school district in southern California over a two-year period. Pre- and post-test measures of oral reading fluency for 186 first graders representing 11 native languages were the outcome data. Reading fluency data were examined in reference to ratings of literacy practices using the English Learners Classroom Observation Instrument (ELCOI). The ELCOI is a 30-item Likert scale with the following six empirically derived subscales and refers to the teachers' methods in the classroom:

- Explicit teaching: models skills and strategies, provides prompts and adjusts own use of English in the classroom
- Instruction geared toward low-performing students
- Sheltered English techniques: uses visuals to teach content, provides explicit instructions in English, and uses gestures/expressions for clarification
- Interactive teaching: secures and maintains student attention during lesson
- Vocabulary development
- Phonemic awareness and decoding.

The 14 classrooms were observed for 2.5 hours between five and seven times. The observer rated the items on the ELCOI using a four-point Likert scale, ranging from very effective to not effective. The authors calculate the results and then provide a case study of the teacher who received the most effective rating according to the ELCOI. The case study describes a typical morning in the effective teacher's class and, subsequently, a typical morning in the least effective teacher's class. These descriptions are highly illustrative and helpful in terms of what the authors consider effective teaching to first-grade multilingual first language students.

In general, while their results only indicated a moderately strong correlation ($r = 0.65$) between ELCOI rating and gain in oral reading fluency at the end of first grade, the study provided interesting ways of quantifying the notion of "best practice" as it relates to literacy instruction with first-grade multilingual ESL students.

Hammer, C.S., & Miccio, A. W. (2006). Early language and reading development of bilingual preschoolers from low-income families. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 26 (4), 322–337.

This article addresses several studies regarding the reading abilities of Spanish–English elementary age students. The researchers found that bilingual students with good reading skills in their first language often have good reading skills in their second language, but that this correlation is not present if literacy is not primarily established in the first language. They also found that, when spelling, Spanish- literate children used Spanish phonological analysis; e.g., treating diphthongs as two units rather than one. These sorts of mistakes were demonstrated only in individuals who had developed some amount of Spanish literacy before English literacy. They also found that proficiency in English is not related to the prevalence of English spoken in the home and that students can thrive despite a lack of English in the home. Furthermore, it is more important that students receive instruction in their first language to remain proficient and reap the benefits later in life because of the ability to read, write and speak in both languages.

Holm, A., & Dodd, B. (1996). The effect of first written language on the acquisition of English literacy. *Cognition*, 59 (2), 119–147.

Holm and Dodd examine the relationship between first language (L1) and second language (L2) literacy skills. They assessed the performance of 40 university students from the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Vietnam and Australia who were compared on a series of tasks that assess phonological awareness, reading and spelling skills in English. The results indicated that those with no alphabetic L1 literacy had limited phonological awareness compared to those students with alphabetic L1 literacy. Holm and Dodd concluded that ESL students transfer their literacy processing skills from their L1 to English, and that students from non-alphabetic written language backgrounds might have difficulties with new and unfamiliar words when learning English.

Ingersoll, C. (2001). Meeting the language needs of low-literacy adult immigrants in Washington, D.C. and suburban northern Virginia. ERIC No. [ED456676](http://www.eric.ed.gov), <http://www.eric.ed.gov> (Accessed March 17, 2008).

This paper investigates how adult native Spanish immigrants with low literacy levels are being taught new English language skills. Several different programs were examined—those that offered only ESL classes and those that also offered native literacy instruction. The programs were assessed by conducting surveys with respect to the administrative characteristics of the program such as the number of students, qualifications of the teachers, sources of instructional materials and financial assistance; the pedagogical reasons for starting the programs; and the reasons students wanted to participate. From the results of their surveys, they concluded that it is harder for students with native low-literacy (NLL) skills to succeed in ESL classes. NLL students had higher dropout rates due to poor study skills and poor attitudes toward learning. As previous research has supported, they suggest that a student with very low literacy skills might be better served by an available NLL class instead of an ESL class. They suggested that literacy in one's native language makes it easier to learn ESL but learning English is possible even if the student is not literate in his or her native language.

Johansson, L., Angst K., Beer B., Martin S., Rebeck W., & Sibilleau, N. Canadian language benchmarks 2000: ESL for literacy learners. Ottawa, ON: Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks.

This is a project report by the Board of Education of Winnipeg regarding ESL students in Canada who are not literate in their native language for various reasons. This report discusses several types of ESL students, including pre-, non- and semi-literate, and the students from non-Roman alphabet languages. This report discusses descriptions of what ESL literacy students are able to do at various stages of their development. The report discusses and describes learners in terms of a foundation phase and three other phases.

The foundation phase describes a small minority of beginning ESL literacy second language learners who need to develop and practice the specific visual and motor/mechanical skills that are needed in the pre-reading and pre-writing literacy process. Phase I learners become aware that

print conveys meaning and that there is a connection between oral language and print. They begin to recognize the value that Canadian society places on reading, writing and numeracy. Phase II learners develop expectations around print; e.g., that print is organized in a way that aids comprehension. Phase III ESL literacy learners expand their knowledge of the written language and they can read and respond to a wider variety of authentic and teacher-adapted texts.

Klassen, C., & Burnaby, B.(1993). Those who know: Views on literacy among adult immigrants in Canada. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27 (3), 377–397.

This study looks at the statistics from a variety of sources regarding ESL students who have had little previous literacy experience. According to a 1981 census, compared with their Canadian-born counterparts, immigrant adults had only elementary education, suggesting that the proportion among immigrants in Canada with minimal schooling is increasing. The article also reports on the Survey of Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities (LSUDA) from Statistics Canada 1991, concerning adult literacy proficiency. The LSUDA reported that adult immigrant participants were almost five times more likely than their Canadian counterparts to be represented at low-literacy levels and significantly less likely to be represented at the highest literacy level. It further reported that about 32% of foreign- born women and 24% of foreign-born men had extreme difficulty dealing with printed materials, compared with approximately one-tenth of Canadian-born adults. The article goes on to describe a Toronto-based case study of low-level literacy and then explores issues concerning Latin American adults and reading and writing.

Lesaux, N. K.,& Siegel,L. S.(2003).The development of reading in children who speak English as a second language. *Developmental Psychology*, 39 (6), 1015–19.

Certain pre-reading skills are necessary for early reading acquisition in English.

For example phonological processing, syntactic awareness and working memory are the cognitive processes assumed to be significant in the development of reading skills in English. This study

looked at whether these skills are also important in reading for children of ESL backgrounds. The researchers looked at the development of reading in a program designed for children who enter Kindergarten with little or no proficiency in English, the language of instruction. Previous studies have shown that teaching children to read in a language in which they are not yet proficient is an additional risk factor for reading problems.

The authors of this study administered measures of reading, spelling, language and memory skills to a large cohort of children from linguistically diverse backgrounds to gain insight into whether similar patterns exist in ESL and first language (L1) speaking children who are experiencing reading failure and the overall development of early reading in children who are ESL speakers. The study was longitudinal in nature, which afforded the opportunity to examine those skills in Kindergarten that are later predictors of reading ability for ESL students. Participants were 978 (790 L1 speakers and 188 ESL speakers) Grade 2 children involved in a longitudinal study that began in Kindergarten. In Kindergarten and Grade 2, participants completed standardized and experimental measures including reading, spelling, phonological processing and memory. All children received phonological awareness instruction in Kindergarten and phonics instruction in Grade 1.

By the end of Grade 2, the ESL speakers' reading skills were comparable to those of L1 speakers and ESL speakers even outperformed L1 speakers on several measures. The findings demonstrate that a model of early identification and intervention for children at risk is beneficial for ESL speakers and also suggest that the effects of bilingualism on the acquisition of early reading skills may be positive. Leu, D.J.Jr., Castek, J., Coiro, M., Gort, M., Henry, L.A., & Lima, C.O. (2005). Developing new literacies among multilingual learners in the elementary grades Presented at a colloquium as part of the Technology in Support of Young Second Language Learners Project at the University of California. <http://www.newliteracies.uconn.edu/pubs.html> (Accessed March 17, 2008).

This paper explores the potential of the intersection between language, literacy and the Internet for multilingual learners. The authors suggest that the Internet requires new reading, writing and communication skills in addition to foundational literacy skills required within traditional book and print technologies. Specifically, the Internet is the most important context for literacy in an information age; it requires new literacy skills, strategies and dispositions in reading, writing and communication to fully exploit its information and learning potential; and it provides special opportunities for multilingual learners and schools in an increasingly globalized world. Specifically, the authors address this focal question, “How might we best support the development of new literacies among elementary age children who are simultaneously acquiring language and literacy in both English and their native language?” The authors define “new literacies” as:

- Central to full civic, economic and personal participation in a globalized community, and critical to educational research and the education of all of our students
- Deictic because they regularly change as their defining technologies change
- Multifaceted because they benefit from analysis that brings multiple points of view to the discussion.

From this, the researchers argue that new technologies create new literacies that have led to changes in the nature of reading, writing and communicating due to the Internet and other information technologies.

Examples of projects to incorporate literacy and learning into technology-centered classes to support multilingual learners are:

- Out-of-school technology projects
- Online international projects used in schools
- Online international projects used both in and out of school.

Within each category the authors provide Web site names for projects and groups that have ongoing activities for students to learn English through the Internet and interact with other students their own age.

The article concludes by encouraging educators to view multilingual students not as a problem to be solved but rather as an opportunity for learning, and the Internet can be a very helpful tool in this pursuit.

Lipka, O., Siegel, L.S., & Vukovic, R. (2005). The literacy skills of English language learners in Canada. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 20 (1), 39–49.

The Canadian research is aimed at identifying reading disabilities in English language learners. This article focuses on three areas which are identified as important for the development of literacy skills in both ESL students and English-speaking students. The areas are phonological processing, syntactic awareness and working memory. It is assumed that phonological processing is the most important aspect with respect to learning to read. Whereas some studies have found that normal young ESL students are equivalent or superior to their English-speaking peers in terms of phonological awareness, others show ESL students to be inferior. In terms of syntactic awareness, it is shown that while young ESL students perform below average on syntactic awareness tasks, this difference is not as evident among older ESL students. In working memory tasks ESL students perform below their English-speaking peers at the Kindergarten level but this difference is gone a year later and it does not seem to affect literacy skills. Due to the similarity between the abilities of normal ESL students and normal English-speaking children, and the fact that reading disabilities occur in no greater numbers among ESL students, the use of similar measures in identifying reading disabled ESL students and reading disabled English-speaking children is appropriate.

Páez, M., & Rinaldi, C. (2006). Predicting English word reading skills for Spanish-speaking students in first grade. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 26 (4), 338–350.

A longitudinal study followed 244 low-income English language learners from age four through Kindergarten and Grade 1. The majority were born in the United States but lived in Spanish-speaking households. All children attended schools where English was the language of instruction. The children were tested using the Woodcock Language Proficiency Battery—Revised test and tasks designed by the researchers to test the three aspects responsible for good language learning of phonological skills, early reading skills such as word recognition, and oral language abilities. In general, their English word reading skills were equivalent to monolinguals and their Spanish word reading skills were below average. However, word reading abilities in Spanish along with English phonological awareness at the Kindergarten level were found to be predictors of English reading skills later on. These findings indicate that similar testing procedures can be used to determine whether the reading difficulties that are experienced by ESL students are a result of their lack of English skills or due to learning disabilities. A screening program such as that used in the study is suggested as a method for identifying students who may encounter difficulties later on. It is also suggested that reading instruction for these children should be vocabulary based and instruction in the child's first language should also be continued.

Pollard-Durodola, S. D., Mathes, P. G., Vaughn, S., Cardenas-Hagan, E., & Linan-Thompson, S. (2006). The role of oracy in developing comprehension in Spanish-speaking English language learners. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 26 (4), 365–384.

A pedagogical framework is suggested for Spanish-speaking English language learners based on an overview of the practice-related findings from four different studies conducted with students who are at risk for developing reading difficulties. The study first looks at English-speaking students and notes that the successful intervention involves the three aspects of reading content, explicit instruction and the early establishment of reading skills. Intensive instruction in small groups significantly improved most English-speaking students' reading abilities. There is less information on the development of Spanish-speaking children's reading abilities. However, the orthographic similarities between the two languages led the researchers to believe that the process

of learning to read is similar in Spanish and English. However, they do recognize that there are differences in the way that the two languages are written. Spanish has a relatively consistent sound-to-symbol correspondence while English does not. In addition, the simple syllable structure of Spanish means that Spanish readers are able to decipher longer words at an earlier stage than English readers. It is, therefore, suggested that explicit instruction to ESL students in the areas of oral language, phonemic awareness, and alphabetic knowledge, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension strategies be conducted. Students who were involved in such programs improved in the areas of phonological awareness, letter-sound identification, word attack and comprehension skills. They suggest the use of explicit reading programs focusing on these four areas within a shared book reading routine to improve the English reading skills of Spanish-speaking ESL students.

Slavin, R., & Cheung, A., (2003). Effective reading programs for English language learners: A best-evidence synthesis. Report 66, Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR). Baltimore, MD: CRESPAR/Johns Hopkins University.

This report reviews research on effective reading instruction for English language learners in an attempt to apply consistent, well-justified standards of evidence to learn about effective reading instruction for these children. The authors focus equally on language of instruction and on replicable programs intended to improve the reading achievement of ESL students. This review applies a technique called “best-evidence synthesis” (Slavin, 1986), which attempts to use consistent, clear standards to identify unbiased, meaningful information from experimental studies and then discusses each qualifying study, computing effect sizes but also describing the context, design and findings of each study.

The purpose of this review is to examine the evidence on reading programs for ESL students to discover how much of a scientific basis there is for competing claims about effects of various programs. The purpose of the report is to inform practitioners and policymakers about the tools

they have at hand to help all ESL students learn to read, and to inform researchers about the current state of the evidence on this topic as well as gaps in the knowledge base in need of further scientific investigation.

The report covers a series of topics by describing the issue and some of the solutions and then evaluating the relevant research. The following topics are covered:

- Language of instruction: immersion versus bilingual programs
- Effective reading programs for ESL students.

While this report deals primarily with Hispanic students learning English, there are various points that are relevant to the Canadian context such as ways in which to evaluate program effectiveness.

