
Thank you for your request to our REL Reference Desk regarding evidence-based information about oral language, phonics, and fluency instruction for English language learners. Ask A REL is a collaborative reference desk service provided by the ten regional educational laboratories (REL) that, by design, functions much in the same way as a technical reference library. It provides references, referrals, and brief responses in the form of citations on research based education questions.

The information below represents the most rigorous research available. Researchers consider the type of methodology and give priority to research reports that employ well described and thorough methods. The resources were also selected based on the date of the publication with a preference for research from the last ten years. Additional criteria for inclusion include the source and funder of the resource.

Question: *What research supports developing English language learners' (ages 10-17) oral language, phonics, and/or oral reading fluency skills in English? What are the research based instructional recommendations for each skill?*

Search Process

Key words and search strings used in the search: *oral language AND English language learners; phonics instruction OR word analysis AND English language learners; fluency instruction AND English language learners*

Search databases and websites:

1. ERIC: <http://www.eric.ed.gov/>
2. JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/action/showAdvancedSearch>
3. Google Scholar: www.google.com/scholar
4. Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Resources: <http://ies.ed.gov>
5. What Works Clearinghouse: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>

Sample Citations Retrieved:

Oral Language and Vocabulary Development

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. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-5826.2005.00120.x

Abstract/Summary: English language learners (ELLs) who experience slow vocabulary

development are less able to comprehend text at grade level than their English-only peers. Such students are likely to perform poorly on assessments in these areas and are at risk of being diagnosed as learning disabled. In this article, we review the research on methods to develop the vocabulary knowledge of ELLs and present lessons learned from the research concerning effective instructional practices for ELLs. The review suggests that several strategies are especially valuable for ELLs, including taking advantage of students' first language if the language shares cognates with English; ensuring that ELLs know the meaning of basic words, and providing sufficient review and reinforcement. Finally, we discuss challenges in designing effective vocabulary instruction for ELLs. Important issues are determining which words to teach, taking into account the large deficits in second-language vocabulary of ELLs, and working with the limited time that is typically available for direct instruction in vocabulary.

Gersten, R. & Baker, S. (2000). What we know about effective instructional practices for English language learners. *Exceptional Children*, 66, 454-470.

Abstract/Summary: A multivocal synthesis involving 13 educators and researchers investigated effective instruction for English-language learners and found five specific instructional variables, including: building and using vocabulary as a curricula anchor, using visuals to reinforce concepts, implementing cooperative learning and peer-tutoring strategies, using native language strategically, and modulating cognitive and language demands.

Kieffer, M. J., & Lesaux, N. K. (2012). Effects of academic language instruction on relational and syntactic aspects of morphological awareness for sixth graders from linguistically diverse backgrounds. *The Elementary School Journal*, 112, 519-545. doi: 10.1086/663299

Abstract/Summary: One dimension of language proficiency considered important for reading and writing academic texts is morphological awareness—the understanding of how complex words are formed from meaningful smaller units (i.e., affixes, roots) that contribute to words' meanings and functions. This quasi-experimental study evaluated the effects of instruction on syntactic and relational aspects of morphological awareness for language minority (LM) learners ($n = 349$) and native English speakers ($n = 133$) in grade 6. In 7 urban middle schools, teachers implementing an 18-week multicomponential academic language intervention were matched to teachers providing the standard curriculum to students with similar achievement and demographics. Multilevel modeling indicated statistically significant, practically meaningful effects on morphological awareness. For relational aspects, LM learners and their peers demonstrated similar gains. For syntactic aspects, LM learners demonstrated greater gains than their peers. Findings suggest the potential benefits of incorporating morphology into academic language instruction, particularly for LM learners.

Lesaux, N. K., & Kieffer, M. J. (2010). The effectiveness and ease of implementation of an academic vocabulary intervention for linguistically diverse students in urban middle schools. *Reading Research Quarterly, 15*, 196-228. doi: 10.1598/RRQ.45.2.3

Abstract/Summary: The present study aims to advance the extant research base by evaluating the implementation and effectiveness of an academic vocabulary program designed for use in mainstream middle school classrooms with high proportions of language minority learners. The quasi-experimental, mixed-methods study was conducted in 21 classes (13 treatment matched to 8 control) in seven middle schools in a large district, with 476 sixth-grade students (346 language minority learners, 130 native English speakers). Classroom observations and teacher logs indicated the 18-week program was implemented with good fidelity and that the approach contrasted sharply with the standard district English language arts (ELA) curriculum. Multilevel modeling indicated that the program resulted in significant effects on several aspects of vocabulary knowledge, including meanings of taught words ($d = 0.39$; $p < .0001$), morphological awareness ($d = 0.20$; $p = .0003$), and the word meanings as presented in expository text ($d = 0.20$; $p = .0227$). The program also yielded marginally significant, but promising effects on a depth of word knowledge measure ($d = 0.15$; $p = 0.0830$) and a norm-referenced measure of reading comprehension ($d = 0.15$; $p = .0568$). No effects were found on a norm-referenced vocabulary measure. These effects were comparable for language minority learners and their native-English-speaking classmates. Data from teachers shed light on the challenges of meeting students' diverse instructional needs and the roles of curriculum and professional networks in building instructional capacity. The findings show promise in developing effective multifaceted vocabulary instruction for implementation by ELA teachers in middle school classrooms with high numbers of language minority learners.

Kieffer, M. J. (2012). Early oral language and later reading development in Spanish-speaking English language learners: Evidence from a nine-year longitudinal study. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 33*, 146-157. doi: 1.1016/u.appdev.2012.02.003

Abstract/Summary: Using nationally-representative, longitudinal data on a cohort of Spanish-speaking English language learners in the U.S., this study investigated the extent to which early oral language proficiency in Spanish and English predicts later levels and rates of growth in English reading. Latent growth models indicated that both Spanish and English proficiency in kindergarten predicted levels of English reading in third through eighth grade, but that only English proficiency was uniquely predictive. English productive vocabulary was found to be a better predictor of later English reading than more complex measures, i.e., listening comprehension and story retell, contrary to findings for native English speakers. Oral language did not predict later growth rates. Findings suggest the need for educational efforts to develop oral language during early childhood for this underserved population. Findings further suggest

that such early efforts may be necessary, but insufficient to accelerate ELLs' reading trajectories as they move into adolescence.

Phonics

Lipka, O., & Siegel, L. S. (2012). The development of reading comprehension skills in children learning English as a second language. *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 25, 1873-1898. doi: 10.1007/s11145-011-9309-8

Abstract/Summary: Reading comprehension is a multi-dimensional process that includes the reader, the text, and factors associated with the activity of reading. Most research and theories of comprehension are based primarily on research conducted with monolingual English speakers (L1). The present study was designed to investigate the cognitive and linguistic factors that have an influence on reading comprehension in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) speakers. The cognitive aspects of reading comprehension among L1 speakers and ESL speakers in the seventh grade were investigated. The performance of both groups was compared and the role of some relevant processes, including word reading, word reading fluency, phonological awareness, working memory, and morphological and syntactic awareness were assessed. Within this sample, three groups were examined: (1) children with poor comprehension (PC) in the absence of word reading difficulties (2) children with poor word reading and poor comprehension (poor readers, PR) (3) and children with both good word reading and comprehension abilities (good comprehenders, GC). The results demonstrated that a variety of cognitive processes, such as working memory and phonological, syntactic, and morphological awareness are important for reading comprehension and compromised in poor comprehenders. The GC group performed better than the PC group on all of the cognitive measures, indicating that comprehension depends on a variety of phonological, memory and linguistic processes and that adequate word recognition skill are important for reading comprehension. The prevalence of the ESL and L1 students was similar across the three reading groups. The ESL and L1 students demonstrated similar performance, indicating that the skills underlying reading comprehension are similar in the ESL and L1 students. This study demonstrated that ESL students are capable of developing word reading and reading comprehension skills that are as strong as those of their L1 peers.

Pollard-Durodola, S. D., & Simmons, D. C. (2009). The role of explicit instruction and instructional design in promoting phonemic awareness development and transfer from Spanish to English. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 25, 139-161. doi: 10.1080/10573560802683531

Abstract/Summary: There is growing evidence of cross-language transfer in metalinguistic

processes related to reading acquisition and development. In particular, phonological awareness is a requisite process that shares similarities across Spanish and English. Through explicit instruction and instructional design analyses, we propose principles to facilitate phonemic awareness development and transfer from Spanish to English for children at risk for early reading difficulties. In this article we (a) profile the early reading performance of English language learners, (b) highlight the role of phonemic awareness in learning to read in alphabetic languages, and (c) propose 4 instructional design principles to accelerate English language learners' acquisition and development of phonemic awareness.

Fluency

Tam, K. Y., Heward, W. L., & Heng, M. A. (2006). A reading instruction intervention program for English-language learners who are struggling readers. *Journal of Special Education, 40*(, 79-93.

Abstract/Summary: We used a multiple baseline across students design to evaluate the effects of an intervention program consisting of vocabulary instruction, error correction, and fluency building on oral reading rate and comprehension of five English-language learners who were struggling readers in a primary school. During the first intervention condition (new passage each session), the first author (a) explained the meanings of new vocabulary words from the session's passage, used each vocabulary word in a sentence, and asked the learner to use each word in a sentence; (b) corrected oral reading errors during the learner's initial oral reading of the passage; (c) asked the learner to read the passage as fast as she or he could for three consecutive trials; and (d) asked five literal comprehension questions about the passage. The same procedures were used during the second intervention condition (same passage to criterion), except the same passage was used across sessions until the learner reached a predetermined number of words read correctly per minute. During the "new passage each session" condition, the oral reading rate of all five learners showed marked improvements over their performance during baseline. During the "same passage to criterion" condition, four of five learners reached the predetermined fluency criterion of 100 correct words per minute. The mean number of comprehension questions answered correctly per session was notably higher during both intervention conditions than during baseline.

Graves, A. W., Duesbery, L., Pyle, N. B., Brandon, R. R., McIntosh, A. S. (2011). Two studies of tier II literacy development. *Elementary School Journal, 111*, 641-661. doi: 10.1086/659036

Abstract/Summary: Two experimental studies at one urban middle school investigated the

effects of the combination of Tier I and Tier II evidence-based reading instruction compared to Tier I alone on struggling sixth-grade readers (N109). All participants received free or reduced-price lunch, and 95% were considered English learners at some point in their school history. In both studies, Tier II intervention consisted of intensive instruction in word analysis, fluency building, comprehension, and vocabulary for 30 hours across 10 weeks. Results of both studies taken individually and combined indicated significant differences in favor of the intervention groups on oral reading fluency. The second study indicated significantly stronger performances for the intervention group on the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test—Revised (WRMT-R/NU) passage comprehension subtest. Tier II interventions and Response to Intervention (RTI) for older struggling readers are discussed related to educational implications and future research.

Denton, C. A., Wexler, J., Vaughn, S., & Bryan, D. (2008). Intervention provided to linguistically diverse middle school students with severe reading difficulties. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 23*, 79-89. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-5826.2008.0026.x

Abstract/Summary: This study investigated the effectiveness of a multicomponent reading intervention implemented with middle school students with severe reading difficulties, all of whom had received remedial and/or special education for several years with minimal response to intervention. Participants were 38 students in grades 6–8 who had severe deficits in word reading, reading fluency, and reading comprehension. Most were Spanish-speaking English language learners (ELLs) with identified disabilities. Nearly all demonstrated severely limited oral vocabularies in English and, for ELLs, in both English and Spanish. Students were randomly assigned to receive the research intervention (n = 20) or typical instruction provided in their school's remedial reading or special education classes (n = 18). Students in the treatment group received daily explicit and systematic small-group intervention for 40 minutes over 13 weeks, consisting of a modified version of a phonics-based remedial program augmented with English as a Second Language practices and instruction in vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension strategies. Results indicated that treatment students did not demonstrate significantly higher outcomes in word recognition, comprehension, or fluency than students who received the school's typical instruction and that neither group demonstrated significant growth over the course of the study. Significant correlations were found between scores on teachers' ratings of students' social skills and problem behaviors and posttest decoding and spelling scores, and between English oral vocabulary scores and scores in word identification and comprehension. The researchers hypothesize that middle school students with the most severe reading difficulties, particularly those who are ELLs and those with limited oral vocabularies, may require intervention of considerably greater intensity than that provided in this study. Further research directly addressing features of effective remediation for these students is needed.

Dominguez De Ramirez, R., Shapiro, E.S., & Edward, S. (2007). Cross-language relationship

between Spanish and English oral reading fluency among Spanish-speaking English language learners in bilingual education. *Psychology in the Schools*, 44(8), 795-806. doi: 10.1002/pits.20266

Abstract/Summary: This study examined whether oral reading fluency in a child's first language(Spanish) as assessed by Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM) was related to oral reading fluency in a second language(English) and whether Spanish oral reading fluency probes administered in the fall were predictive of English oral reading fluency outcomes for spring of the same academic year. A total of 68 bilingual education students across grades 1 through 5 were assessed in Spanish and English during the fall, winter, and spring. Results showed that reading in Spanish and English across grades and time periods correlated moderately high with the exception of fourth grade. In addition, Spanish oral reading fluency at the beginning of the year significantly predicted English reading outcomes at the end of the year. These findings suggest that CBM can be a valuable tool for evaluating the relationship between oral reading fluency in both the first and second language.

Additional Resources

Gersten, R., Baker, S. K., Shanahan, T., Linan-Thompson, S., Collins, P., & Scarcella, R. (2007). *Effective literacy and English language instruction for English learners in the elementary grades: A practice guide* (NCEE 2007-4011). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/practiceguides>

Abstract/Summary: The goal of this practice guide is to formulate specific and coherent evidence-based recommendations for use by educators addressing a multifaceted challenge that lacks developed or evaluated packaged approaches. The challenge is effective literacy instruction for English learners in the elementary grades. At one level, the target audience is a broad spectrum of school practitioners—administrators, curriculum specialists, coaches, staff development specialists, and teachers. At another level, a more specific objective is to reach district-level administrators with a practice guide that will help them develop practice and policy options for their schools. The guide includes specific recommendations for district administrators and indicates the quality of the evidence that supports these recommendations.

Francis, D. J., Rivera, M., Lesaux, N., Kieffer, M., & Rivera, H. (2006). *Practical guidelines for the education of English language learners: Research-based recommendations for instruction and academic interventions*. Portsmouth, NH: Center on Instruction, RMC Research Cooperation.

Abstract/Summary: This document provides evidence-based recommendations to educators who make instructional decisions for English Language Learners (ELLs). It covers both reading and mathematics. The report begins with statistics on ELLs in America's schools and a discussion of their educational needs, especially the acquisition of academic language – an essential part of learning literacy. The report takes a developmental perspective of reading and is guided by five principles that relate to planning effective instruction and intervention for ELLs: (1) The crucial application for reading skills is to learn new concepts and develop new knowledge across a range of content areas; (2) In order to plan for effective instruction, educators must have a clear understanding of the specific sources of difficulty or weakness for individual students and groups of students; (3) ELLs--whether formally designated LEP or not—often lack the academic language necessary for comprehending and analyzing text; (4) The great majority of ELLs experiencing reading difficulties struggle with the skills related to fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension; (5) When planning instruction and intervention, there is a need to consider the function of the instruction (i.e., preventive, augmentative, or remedial).

Francis, D. J., Rivera, M., Lesaux, N., Kieffer, M., & Rivera, H. (2007). Practical guidelines for the education of English language learners: Research-based recommendations for serving adolescent newcomers. Portsmouth, NH: Center on Instruction, RMC Research Cooperation.

Abstract/Summary: This document focuses on ELL students in grades 6 through 12 who have been enrolled in an English-speaking school for less than two years. While developing ability to converse in English and basic reading skills, adolescent ELLs must also develop oral and written academic language skills if they are to succeed in the classroom; and they must develop these skills in a short time frame. The first part of the document lists six elements of effective instruction. One example is that all adolescent newcomers need instruction in academic language; another is that they need direct, explicit instruction to support their understanding challenging textbooks. Following each element are suggestions for aligning teaching with the element. The second part of the document presents organization elements of effective newcomer programs.

Referrals

Organizations:

- TESOL International Association: <http://www.tesol.org/>
- The National Association for Bilingual Education: <http://www.nabe.org>
- Center for Adult English Language Acquisition: <http://www.cal.org/cae>
- Center for Applied Linguistics: <http://www.cal.org/index.html>
- Colorín Colorado: www.colorincolorado.org

Federally Funded Resources:

- Institute of Education Sciences (IES), public search engine available at: <http://ies.ed.gov/pubsearch/>
- What Works Clearinghouse: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>
- Office of English Language Acquisition: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oela/index.html>
- National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition: <http://www.ncele.gwu.edu>
- Center on Instruction (<http://www.centeroninstructon.org>)

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