

Factors Influencing the Reading Development of English Language Learners

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Abstract

In the past decade there has been a lot of controversy about the persistent achievement gap between English language learners (ELLs) and native English speakers (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005). In many school districts less than 12% of ELLs make it to the tenth grade (Darling-Hammond, 2007). This percentage continues to decrease because of the current low level of reading development among ELLs in K-3 grades. As claimed by a recent report, by the year 2015 approximately one-fourth of the schools population will be identified as Latino (Hof et al., 2007). This is a problem considering that many of the ELLs population are failing. According to recent studies most schools lack the knowledge and resources needed to support ELL students in the regular classroom setting or to implement instructional strategies that complement cultural background of Latino students (Hof et al., 2007). Some additional factors effecting reading development include narrowed curriculum, inappropriate assessments, and untrained educators. Not addressing these issues will continue in the misdiagnosing of ELLs in special education services or English as a Second Language (ESL) services.

Introduction

Over the past ten years the number of students in the United States who speak another language other than English has quickly increased to 5.5 million (Al Otaiba et al., 2009). Spanish is the first language for more than 70% of these students, and Latinos are now the fastest growing minority group in American schools (Al Otaiba et al., 2009). We use English language learner (ELL) as the term for students who first learn a language other than English in their home and community and then learn English as a new language (Genesee et al., 2005). In the past we identified these students as Limited English Proficient (LEP). An LEP student is one whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual the ability to meet the State's proficient level of achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Other labels have been non-native English speaker, language minority student, ESL (English as a Second Language) student, or bilingual student (Genesee et al., 2005).

This rapid population growth of Latino students has led to some negative consequences (Yzquierdo, Blalock, & Torres-Velasquez, 2004). For instances, many more ELLs are often retained and put into special education programs (Yzquierdo et al., 2004). Reading difficulties are the reason that the majority of these students receive special education. The following table demonstrates the results of students scoring at Proficient and Above by Subgroup in the STAR for 2003-2009 (O'Connell, 2009). This occurs because they constantly continue to be misdiagnosed and overrepresented when referred for evaluation for a possible disability, as well as for inappropriate special education services (Yzquierdo et al., 2004). By 2025 it is assumed that one of every four students will be an ELL. The nationwide school-age population will be 25 percent Latino, and states such as California, Texas, Florida, and New York will have public school districts that are more than 50 percent Latino (Mc Keta, 2008).

In the opinion of Darling-Hammond (2007), one of the main contributors for the lack of reading development in ELLs is the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB is based on the belief that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals can improve individual outcomes in education. The Act requires states to develop assessments in basic skills to be given to all students in certain grades, if those states are to receive federal funding for schools. NCLB is based on the belief that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals can improve individual outcomes in education (Darling-Hammond, 2007). NCLB is an act designed to set goals for states. The goals are: to raise test scores; provide teachers that are highly qualified teachers, for all students to be proficient in reading and math by 2014, including English Language Learners and students with special needs, and to close the achievement gap with accountability and flexibility (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

However, Darling-Hammond believes this act has failed to accomplish these goals and has forced negative consequences. Some of these consequences are that it has created a narrow curriculum, inappropriate assessments for ELLs, and unequal educational resources across schools. Furthermore, this law focuses on test scores as indicators of school quality, and it ignores the resources that permit school quality. Since this Act has been implemented one-third of public schools have been targeted as having failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and are being labeled as failing schools (Darling-Hammond, 2007). By 2014 an estimate of 99% of California schools are expected to fail. If this law stays in effect it will lead to reductions in federal funding. One analyst has calculated that it would take schools more than 160 years to reach such a target (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Studies on the development of literacy in English as a second language have been proven to be one of the greatest challenges educators face. Research findings indicate that a significant number of ELLs are experiencing academic difficulties due to lack of proficiency in the English Language (Betts, Bolt, Decker, Muyskens, & Marston, 2009). According to a compilation of reports from 41 state education agencies, only 18.7% of students classified as limited English proficient met state norms for reading in English (Genesee et al., 2005). As stated by Betts et al. (2009) it takes 2 to 3 years for students to develop basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and 5 to 7 years to develop cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). There is little research focused on investigating the specific processes by which English reading development occurs for ELLs. One important factor that has been identified is the length of time one is exposed to the new culture (Betts et al., 2009). Betts et al., (2009) conducted a study that examined the development of English reading achievement among ELLs and determined whether the time that an ELL's family was in the United States and the type of native language spoken affected their reading development. The participants were 300 third-grade ELLs from two different native languages. The participants were administered the oral form of Language Assessment Scale (LAS) to identify their reading fluency. To evaluate the extent in which the family used the English language parents or guardians were asked to complete a home language survey. Results indicated that the time an ELL's family had been in the U.S. was an important factor in understanding the development of ELLs' reading achievement, whereas language type did not appear to be as important (Betts et al., 2009). However, this study did have some limitations. The LAS used in this study had limited evidence of reliability and validity and more research is needed to determine its technical adequacy (Betts et al., 2009).

Work conducted by Anthony (2008) suggests that teachers need to recognize the importance of intentionally targeting the language output of children who are learning English as

a second language. Output strategies have been defined as the product of learning-or how children demonstrate what they have learned (Anthony, 2008). It has recently been explored as a learning process that includes four categories: collaborative conversations, vocabulary, writing, and reading (Anthony, 2008). Within these categories there are three possible functions of output: noticing/triggering, hypothesis testing, and metalinguistic/reflective functions. Noticing or triggering function can occur when an ELL student is trying to convey a message and they notice that they do not know how. This triggers the learner to explore further in the new language. Hypothesis testing can also be referred as a “trial-run” of how to communicate a message. An ELL begins to think of what that message should sound like or look like. The reflective function occurs when language is used to reflect on the language that a learner produces or is produced by others (Anthony, 2008).

Based on this research in order to begin using output strategies teachers need to create a literate environment. Doing so will empower ELLs to cross over the instructional divide of confusion into meaningful learning. In order to create this environment the teacher may lower the barriers of cognitive load reducing the number of new concepts introduced in lessons. Then, the teacher may reduce the language load by using less complex unfamiliar English words.

Last, the teacher may minimize the learning load by lessening the activities and repeating explicitly. It is very crucial to target output during common practices such as conversations, vocabulary, reading, and writing. During these common practices students’ should be encouraged to use their native language (Klinger, Artiles, & Barletta, 2006). It is no longer enough to expose children to quality language and expect that this input alone will be enough to learn a new language (Anthony, 2008). Teachers, not the program being used, have the responsibility to offer opportunities for output and to respond to output by helping students produce appropriate language.

The National Reading Panel conducted studies on literacy and found that vocabulary knowledge is increased by making connections with other reading material, oral language, and multiple exposures to words in a variety of contexts (Corona, 2007). ELLs need to make connections with other reading material and their environment. This can be accomplished by increasing their knowledge of vocabulary before reading or through active engagement. Educators teaching ELLs must have a collection of visuals and photographs for all areas of curriculum. Teaching words in isolation does not work unless it is accompanied with visuals. Using definitions, context clues, and multiple encounters with words has been proven to increase reading development. *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction* is a book that is an excellent resource for both teachers and librarians (Corona, 2007). Any activity or game that requires students to explain word meanings using definition, synonyms, antonyms, drawings, or charades is excellent for reinforcing the meaningful acquisition of words. Since ELLs have difficulty grasping the formal academic English needed for writing and tests the following should be done. As claimed by Corona, students need to know those formal terms and vocabulary in order to understand lessons. Therefore, word recognition and the ability to decode fluently is essential in effectively processing and constructing meaning from class texts and new concepts (Corona & Elia, 2007).

Silverman and Hines (2009) agree that insufficient vocabulary knowledge is a critical problem for many ELLs. In their study they investigated the effects of a research based, read-aloud vocabulary intervention that was enhanced with multimedia support for vocabulary learning. They also investigated if there were a contrasting outcome of the multimedia-enhanced intervention for non-ELL and ELLs. Their hypothesis that multimedia enhancements may improve vocabulary is derived by Pavio's dual coding theory. According to this theory, when information is conveyed both verbally and nonverbally these two systems support each other and

enable greater information recall (Silverman & Hines, 2009). In other words, if you present information about words to children through two channels, one verbal and one nonverbal, it will support their learning of words.

The study was conducted in a small semi-urban public school of eighty-five children with a total of eight teachers participating. Of the children that participated 68% were non-ELLs and 32% were ELLs. The intervention consisted of 45-minute lessons per day for a period of twelve weeks. The results indicated that multimedia-enhanced vocabulary instruction was effective for the ELL students', but not for the non-ELL. The ELL students' demonstrated growth in both the knowledge of target words and in general vocabulary knowledge. Consequently, throughout the study the researchers did not allow the teachers to make any connection between the multimedia and curriculum. As the author admitted the study would have been more effective if instructional scaffolding between the multimedia and classroom activities was allowed. The authors were able to support their study because of the theories they used.

However, this study did have some apparent errors and the author was able to identify and make these errors known. First of all, the author was able to identify that the study was conducted over a small sample size and for a short period of time. The authors argue that in order for a study to be considered reliable or valid in needs to be conducted over a large sample size and over a longer period of time. The author also suggests researching the assumption of multimedia-enhanced interventions for other groups of children (children living in poverty).

Instructional Strategies

Research on instructional practices has examined a wide variety of different methods, techniques, and strategies for promoting the reading and writing skills of ELLs (Genesee et al., 2005). The following methods have been identified to promote reading development: (a) direct instruction, (b) interactive instruction, and (c) process based instruction. Direct instruction

emphasizes the explicit and direct instruction of specific reading and writing skills and strategies. Interactive instruction emphasizes learning that is mediated through interaction with other learners. The goals include specific literacy skills and strategies, such as engagement in reading and writing. Process-based instruction emphasizes engagement in the authentic use of written language for communication or self-expression (Genesee et al., 2005). Studies of classrooms that employed direct instruction and interactive instruction in combination were found to be the most effective. These types of classrooms have much to recommend because they provide instruction in specific reading and writing skills within carefully designed interactive contexts, such as instructional conversations (Genesee et al., 2005).

Hof et al., (2007) investigated The Platte River Corridor Project (PRCP), a project addressing institutional and personal barriers impacting performance of Latino students. The primary goal of this project was to provide advanced training to K-12 educators that (a) promoted understanding of Latino cultural background, (b) identified teacher biases and stereotypes influencing their work, and (d) developed teacher skill in implementing instructional strategies shown to support the academic performance of ELL students in the regular classroom setting (Hof et al., 2006). The participants of this project reported an increase in their ability to provide effective instruction to ELL students. They experienced notable growth in their level of cultural awareness and gained a greater understanding of how their own bias and their failure to make appropriate adaptations in the instructional process were limiting factors for their students (Hof et al., 2007). Evidence from this project suggest the following resources to be effective in teaching ELLs: bilingual storybooks, high interest/low level readers, manipulatives for math and science, language-learning software, modified literature, word walls, and other language related materials (Hof et al., 2007).

According to Corona, teachers should use curriculum material in the students' primary language. However, there is a lot of debate on whether this is effective considering they are trying to learn English. Corona (2007) believes teaching students in their primary language will help students to effectively acquire English as their second language. She also states it will allow these students to take in the information more rapidly if they have visuals of their native culture. Doing so will ease their culture shock because one's providing them with resources that are familiar to them (Corona, 2007).

In Northern California there is a K-8 school that has a two-way dual immersion program with approximately 520 students. From this population 68% are Hispanic, 29% are White, and 3% are other ethnicities (Quintanar-Sarellena, 2004). This school is an example of a school that prepares students for a multilingual and multicultural society by enhancing their bilingualism and academic achievement (Quintanar-Sarellena, 2004). Students' high SAT and SABLE scores, as well as their participation at school and in the community, provide evidence that acquiring two languages does not sacrifice academic achievement (Quintanar-Sarellena, 2004). This school identified with Genesse (2005) factors for a successful two-way bilingual program. The factors are as follows: 1) Duration of 4-6 years; 2) focus on academic curriculum; 3) optimal language input and output; 4) separation of languages for instruction; 5) ratio of English to the non-English language use; 6) additive bilingual environment; 7) a positive school environment and; 8) classroom composition (Genesse, 2005).

Recommendations and Future Directions

In summary, English language learners are not something to send out and fix. It is a process of acquisition that needs special modifications that encourage students to succeed (Hof et al., 2007). Research on the education of ELLs reveals a need for sustained, theory-driven programmatic research that aims to build test models of effective teaching and successful

learning in school settings with ELLs (Genesee et al., 2005). These findings indicate that ELLs are more successful when they participate in programs that are specially designed to meet their needs (ESL, bilingual education). A numerous amount of studies attest that ELLs need an active use of all resources, skills, and strategies at their disposal to acquire literacy skills in English (Genesee et al., 2005). Additional focuses on vocabulary and language development are needed for ELLs to close the gap with non-ELLs. In order to promote the reading development of ELLs school professionals need to recognize that additional time is needed for ELLs to develop certain reading competencies and that they can help accelerate the development of these reading competencies among ELL by stressing the direct teaching of vocabulary and comprehension strategies (Betts et al., 2009).

Goldenberg (2008) recommends that all teachers take a class on first and second language development and strategies for teaching English as a second language. Teachers should also make text in English more comprehensible by using texts with content that is familiar to students. The NLP found that when ELLs read texts with more familiar material, their comprehension improves (Goldenberg, 2008). In addition, to accommodations teachers should have predictable and consistent classroom management routines, aided by diagrams, lists, and easy to read schedules on the board. They should give additional time and opportunities for practice, either during the school day, after school, or for homework. Last, teachers should adjust instruction (teacher vocabulary, rate of speech, sentence complexity, and expectations) and provide opportunities for extended interactions with teacher and peers.

To conclude, some studies highly recommended teaching ELL in their primary language, but ignore the fact that there is not enough qualified staff to do so. As mentioned earlier there is a lot of controversy on whether this would be an effective approach, especially when you are teaching students that come from numerous language backgrounds. Individual studies might point in a

certain direction, but at the time we lack a body of solid studies that permits us to go beyond the general findings about the positive effects of primary language instruction on reading achievement in English (Goldenberg, 2008).

Additionally, researchers strongly suggest that more research is needed to help educators understand the characteristics, development, and learning processes of ELLs who struggle to read. It is also recommended that future research efforts take into account the sociocultural contexts in which students learn as well as affective variables such as motivation (Klinger et al., 2006). Even with all these barriers ELLs can still be helped to achieve higher reading levels with what we know about good instruction and curriculum. The NLP reports that ELLs will benefit from explicit instruction in the components of literacy, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing (Goldenberg, 2008). We have to keep in mind that ELLs learn to read in English just like non-ELL, but with modifications.

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