

## **The Reading Instruction of English Language Learners**

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Current estimates indicate that about 22 % of school-age children in the U. S. live in homes in which a language other than English is spoken (Anstrom, 1996; Crawford, 1997). Spanish speakers are the largest language group. Other language groups include speakers of Arabic, Cantonese, Hmong, Korean, Mandarin, Polish, Russian, or Vietnamese, among others. Federal law requires school personnel to address the second-language needs of second-language learners of English, currently known as English Language Learners, through appropriate and specifically designed instruction (see Crawford, 1997). The type of instruction provided varies according to state law, the number of children from the same language background enrolled at an attendance center, the number of qualified staff, the availability of native-language resources, individual parents' wishes, and students' ages, levels of English proficiency, and US academic performance. Some English Language Learners are enrolled in bilingual education programs in which they receive instruction in their native (home) language along with English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. Others are enrolled in different types of ESL programs or placed in all-English classrooms with native English-speaking students.

A problem that confronts educational personnel in the U. S. who work with English Language Learners is that very few researchers specifically have investigated the early reading development and instruction of U. S. English Language Learners in either the native language or in English (García, 2000). Compared to what we know about the early reading development and instruction of monolingual (one-language) native-English speakers, we know much less about the most effective type of reading instruction for young English Language Learners or how to effectively transition them from native-language literacy to English literacy. The research that is available predominantly has focused on Spanish-speaking students.

In an attempt to guide U. S. educational personnel who work with English Language Learners from a range of language backgrounds and in a variety of instructional settings, this paper draws on both international and US research findings and instructional recommendations. The paper is divided into two major sections. In the first section, research on the reading development of English Language Learners, compared to that of monolingual, native-English-speaking students, is reviewed and instructional and assessment implications are indicated. In the second section, native-language literacy instruction is discussed and four important instructional issues specific to English Language Learners are introduced: the facilitation of cross-linguistic transfer, the provision of native-language support in ESL or all-English classrooms, the sheltering of English reading instruction, and the establishment of home-school connections. At the end of the paper, study group activities and references that should be useful to educational personnel who work with English Language Learners are presented.

### **The Reading Development of English Language Learners**

The limited amount of research conducted on young English Language Learners' reading development means that it is very important for educational personnel to reflect on how the findings presented in this section may impact the applicability of other instructional recommendations presented in the Minnesota REA Professional Development Program. For example, English Language Learners and native English speakers seem to utilize many of the

same general reading processes to read in English (García, 2001; García & Bauer, in press; Gregory, 1996). According to García and Bauer, both groups of students use “grapho-phonics (sound-symbol), lexical (vocabulary), semantic (meaning), and syntactic (language structure) knowledge to decode and comprehend text” as well as background and textual knowledge (schemata) “to make hypotheses and inferences to guide their reading” (p. 4). However, due to the bilingual and second-language status of English Language Learners, it is very likely that their reading development in English and their use of some of the reading processes will differ somewhat from those of native English speakers.

Several researchers have pointed out that unknown English vocabulary is a major problem for English Language Learners (García, 1991; Saville-Troike, 1984). Gregory (1996) also noted that compared to monolingual, native-English speakers, English Language Learners have more difficulty utilizing semantic cues (such as the combination of “bread and butter”) and syntactic cues to figure out the meanings of decodable words. By contrast, other researchers have reported that English Language Learners often can offset some of these difficulties through the use of strategies unique to their bilingual status (García, 1998; Jiménez, García, & Pearson, 1996) and through enhanced metalinguistic awareness (Bruck & Genesee, 1995; García, Jiménez, & Pearson, 1996). Three factors that seem to differentially affect the English reading development of English Language Learners and their responses to English literacy instruction are their exposure to two languages, their literacy development in the native language, and their second language status or oral English proficiency.

### **Exposure to Two Languages**

It is important to remember that English Language Learners, even those who receive all of their school instruction in English, may be exposed to two languages through their interactions at home, school, and the community or through the media (e.g., television). It also is likely that they will see print in both languages at home, school, and in the community. Therefore, even though some of them may not receive school instruction in their native language, we need to recognize that they are bilingual learners who are thinking and constructing meaning across two languages and cultures. When we conduct research, select text, provide instruction, and conduct assessments, we need to keep their bilingual status in mind.

Several researchers have reported that young bilingual children’s exposure to two languages often results in enhanced metalinguistic awareness—the ability to talk about, play with, and analyze language—that may aid them in their early literacy development (Bruck & Genesee, 1995; García, 2000; Gregory, 1996). Although young bilingual children initially may be confused by the presence of two languages, it does not take them too long to separate the two languages and to know which speaker uses which language (Bauer & Montero, 2001; Pérez & Torres-Guzmán, 2002; Rueda & García, 2002). Bauer (2000) even found that at the age of two, her German-English bilingual daughter, who was raised in a “one-parent, one-language” household, predominantly responded to the reading of text according to the language in which it was read.

Bruck and Genesee (1995) have argued that bilingual children’s exposure to two languages seems to result in their intuitive analysis of language similarities and differences, resulting in a heightened awareness of language function and form, compared to that of monolingual children. Several researchers have reported that young bilingual children outperform monolingual children on word referential tasks, in which the children demonstrate

that they understand that the length of a word (e.g., mosquito) does not represent the size of its referent (Bialystok, 1997; Goncz & Kodzopelijic, 1991).

In working with English Language Learners, we need to remember that many of them may have developed enhanced metalinguistic awareness. For example, young English Language Learners usually understand that two words (one in each language) can represent the same concept (García, 1994). Due to their heightened interest in language and language forms, they typically show a keen interest in learning the English names of objects, items, or concepts already known in their native language. Gregory (1996) reported that even when major exposure to English occurred at school, five- and six-year-old English Language Learners in Great Britain had good memories for English words and tended to develop excellent sight vocabulary in English. She also noted that it was not unusual for some English Language Learners, especially those who were not literate in their native language, to approach English literacy events (such as storybook reading) as a vehicle for acquiring English vocabulary.

English Language Learners' exposure to two languages and cultures especially needs to be taken into consideration in their literacy instruction and assessment (see García, 1994). For example, young English Language Learners sometimes will not know equivalent information across the two languages (e.g., they may know the names of some vocabulary items in the native language and the names of other items in English). When they are assessed in both languages, a more complete picture of their knowledge or skill development may be revealed. Similarly, to fully understand the literacy progress of English Language Learners who only receive school instruction in English, it is important to find out how literate they already are in their native language. Without information about English Language Learners' literacy development in the native language, it is difficult to understand the variability in performance that English Language Learners often demonstrate in all-English instructional settings.

### **Role of Native-Language Literacy**

English Language Learners who already are literate in their native language have an advantage over those children who must acquire literacy for the first time in English, a language that they do not know or that they are in the process of acquiring (see Thomas & Collier, 1996; Gregory, 1996). One reason why we think that native-language literacy development helps to facilitate the English reading development of English Language Learners is cross-linguistic transfer.

**Cross-linguistic transfer.** Bilingual students' ability to transfer knowledge and strategies acquired in one language to a second language is called cross-linguistic transfer. Several researchers have reported that young bilingual children who have developed phonological awareness in their native language (e.g., French, Punjabi) are able to transfer this awareness to reading in a second language (e.g., English, French) without any formal instruction (Chiappe & Siegal, 1999; Comeau, Cormier, Grandmaison, & Lacroix, 1999). Durgunoglu, Nagy, and Hancin-Bhatt (1993) reported that first-grade Spanish-speaking students in the U. S. who had phonological awareness in Spanish also were able to transfer this awareness to the decoding of pseudo words and real words in English. Theoretically, the ability to use what already is known in reading one language to approach another should mean that bilingual readers do not have to start over when they approach reading in another language. Gregory (1996) noted that even Mandarin-speaking students, who were learning to read in Mandarin, could transfer their general knowledge of symbol/meaning relationships and attention to detail in Mandarin character identification to their English reading. In a comparative study of the type of reading instruction

that Spanish-speaking students received in Spanish and English, Moll and his colleagues (Moll, Estrada, Diaz, & Lopes, 1980), warned that bilingual students who already were proficient decoders in Spanish, should not have to waste time relearning how to decode in English. Whether bilingual students benefit from a review of similarities in the two languages, and how much time should be spent on such a review is not known. However, several researchers point out that English Language Learners probably do need instruction on English sound-symbol correspondences and grammatical structures that do not exist in the native language (Durgunoglu, et al., 1993; García, 1998; García, 2000).

There is some evidence that English Language Learners literate in their native language also can transfer other types of knowledge and reading strategies acquired in their native language to English reading. For example, if students have learned about the life cycle of a frog in their native language, then they can transfer this information to their English reading. They do not have to relearn the concepts in English but only the English labels/vocabulary that represent the concepts. Gregory (1996) explained that when English Language Learners are presented with reading tasks in English that they already have experienced in their native language, then it is easier for them to make accurate inferences or predictions. Goldman and her colleagues (Goldman, Reyes, & Varnhagen, 1984) found that Spanish-speaking students were able to transfer their knowledge of fables from their Spanish reading to their English reading without any formal instruction.

Unfortunately, cross-linguistic transfer does not seem to be automatic in all bilinguals. Jiménez, García, and Pearson (1996) reported that sixth- and seventh-grade English Language Learners who were not successful English readers thought that they had to keep their reading in Spanish and English separate or they would be confused. These students had a bottom-up view of reading that emphasized decoding and accurate English pronunciation. In contrast, the successful English Language Learners had a unitary view of reading across Spanish and English that focused on comprehension. They used knowledge acquired while reading in one language to make hypotheses and inferences while reading in the other language. In addition, they used similar types of high-level metacognitive and cognitive strategies across the two languages to monitor and repair comprehension. Jiménez et al. wondered to what extent the differences in the less-successful and successful bilingual readers' views of reading in the two languages and approaches to reading were due to the type of instruction that the students had received.

García (1998) reported that fourth-grade English Language Learners who were strong Spanish readers demonstrated using the same types of cognitive strategies while reading in English and Spanish, suggesting cross-linguistic transfer. However, she also reported that one of the students used low-level strategies across both languages (e.g., restating, decoding, and inaccurate inferencing). She warned that educators need to examine the types of strategies that students transfer before equating cross-linguistic transfer with positive features of bilingual reading. García (2000) also wondered to what extent explicit instruction on cross-linguistic transfer strategies would help bilingual students to improve their English reading.

A possible instructional advantage of cross-linguistic transfer is that once students realize that they can use what they have learned while reading in one language to approach the other, they may only need strategy instruction in one language. Muniz-Swicegood (1994) provided third-grade Spanish-speaking students in the US with cognitive strategy instruction in Spanish and found that the students' standardized test scores in both languages increased, suggesting that students had applied what they had learned in Spanish reading to their English reading.

**Unique second-language factors.** Several researchers have reported that English Language Learners sometimes use strategies unique to their bilingual status to reveal or enhance their comprehension (García, 1991, 1998; Jiménez, García, & Pearson, 1996). For example, bilinguals sometimes code-mix (use words from one language while speaking or writing in the other) or code-switch (alternate languages at sentence boundaries) in their responses to texts (Bauer, 2000; García, 1998; Jiménez, et al., 1996). A number of researchers have reported that Spanish-speaking students between the ages of 10-13 sometimes use Spanish cognates (Spanish words that have ancestral roots with English and that are similar in form and meaning, e.g., *enfermo* and *infirm*) to figure out unknown English vocabulary while reading in English (Jiménez, et al., 1996; Nagy, García, Durgunoglu, & Hancin-Bhatt, 1993). García (1998) reported that when fourth-grade Spanish-speaking children used paraphrased translating (put what they read in English into their own words in fluent Spanish) in text think alouds, they actually demonstrated that they had understood the English text. Several researchers have noted that bilingual students often provide more evidence of English text comprehension when they are allowed to discuss or write about what they have read in their native language (García, 1991, 1998; Goldman, et al., 1994; Jiménez, et al., 1996).

In our instruction and assessment of English Language Learners, we need to be aware of the unique ways in which these students may interact with text. We need to accept their use of code-mixing and code-switching and give them the opportunity to retell a story in the native language or write a response in the native language. We also need to investigate the extent to which young English Language Learners from languages with ancestral roots with English, such as Spanish, can benefit from cognate instruction.

**Differences in decoding approaches.** How English Language Learners' approach decoding in English, or what is the most effective decoding approach for English Language Learners compared to native English speakers, may differ. Two related factors that seem to affect English Language Learners' decoding in English are the structure of the native language and how they have learned to decode in the native language. For example, Spanish is a syllabic language, and many Spanish-speaking students learn to decode through a syllabic approach that does not involve on-set rimes (Pérez and Torres-Guzmán, 2002). Because it is difficult to write text in Spanish with one-syllable words, most Spanish-speaking students encounter multisyllabic words in early reading materials. Therefore, two questions need to be raised and investigated regarding the appropriate English reading instruction and assessment of Spanish-speaking students: 1. Do they need to be able to do onset-rimes to effectively decode in English? 2. Will they be able to use their experience with multisyllabic words in Spanish to facilitate their decoding of multisyllabic words in English?

### **Oral English Proficiency (Issues and Questions)**

How much oral English is necessary before English Language Learners can optimally benefit from literacy instruction in English is a question that still is being investigated (García, 2000). Ideally, students should be given the opportunity to become literate in their native language as they acquire English. However, this is not always possible. In a review of the literature on bilingual reading, García noted that findings for young bilingual students (through grade 2) showed that native-language reading was a much stronger predictor of their second-language reading than their second-language oral proficiency. By contrast, the reverse was true for older bilingual students (grades 3-6). García speculated that the different findings could be due to the oral proficiency and reading measures used at the different ages or to the fact that not

all young children (monolingual or bilingual) who are orally proficient in a language are able to read in it. Regardless, it is clear that both native-language literacy and oral English proficiency play key roles in the English literacy development of young English Language Learners.

In working with English Language Learners, it is important to remember that low test scores in English may be due to the students' limited English proficiency and not to any real literacy or cognitive processing difficulties (García, in press, a). When students are not very proficient in English, then they often do not know the meanings of key vocabulary in English or have the appropriate background knowledge necessary to comprehend English text effectively (García, 1991). Their instructional needs may be quite different from those of native-English speakers who are poor readers or who have reading difficulties.

To help inform educational personnel about oral English proficiency issues that may affect the English reading development of English Language Learners, five issues or questions are discussed in more detail below. They include (a) the difference between oral English and academic English, (b) the difference between receptive and productive competence, (c) the importance of a combined focus on decoding and meaning, (d) how language differences in pronunciation and syntax affect oral reading, and (e) whether fluency is an important characteristic of English Language Learners' English reading.

**Oral English versus academic English.** English Language Learners' oral English development (listening and speaking) may develop much more quickly than their English literacy development. Cummins (1981) makes a clear distinction between bilingual students' Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and their Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) to highlight the fact that for students to succeed academically in a second language they need to be able to learn new content material through the second language, not just talk to a classmate or teacher. Depending on the instructional setting, young English Language Learners often become fairly orally proficient in English in three to five years, but do not approach grade-level standards in English academic work until after four to seven years of instruction in U. S. schools. The difference in oral and academic language development is one reason why many school districts now examine the English reading performance of English Language Learners on a standardized reading test in English, along with other assessment measures, before they move students out of a bilingual or ESL setting into the all-English classroom (García, in press, a).

**Receptive versus productive competence.** Rueda and García (2002) point out that English Language Learners' language development often is uneven. For example, second-language learners frequently can understand what is spoken and written, termed receptive competence, in the second language, much quicker and at a more advanced level, than they can speak or write, termed productive competence, in the second language. Some English Language Learners go through a silent period, in which they observe what is occurring in English, but prefer not to participate. Others are risk takers and want to communicate in English even when they are not very proficient. Saville-Troike (1984) has pointed out that the level of oral English participation is not a good indicator of student's academic performance in English. She found that English Language Learners who discussed what was occurring in the classroom in their native language with their peers and who developed higher levels of English vocabulary outperformed the other students on academic measures in English.

**Combined focus on meaning and decoding.** Due to their second-language status, English Language Learners often do not recognize the meanings of English words when they decode them. Therefore, it is important to combine meaning/comprehension with decoding

instruction. Rueda and García (2002) point out that teachers should help students decode words that they already know in English as well as teach them the meanings of new English words as they decode them. Because unknown English vocabulary is a major problem for English Language Learners, a number of researchers recommend that an interactive approach to reading, which combines bottom-up strategies with top-down strategies, guide their English reading instruction (Anderson & Roit, 1996; García & Bauer, in press; Gregory, 1996).

**Language differences in pronunciation and syntax.** It sometimes is difficult for teachers to know when English Language Learners have a decoding problem or a pronunciation problem. Due to differences in how English and the native language are pronounced, English Language Learners may make mistakes in English pronunciation while orally reading. Or, they may not correctly differentiate phonemes during a listening task (García, 1994; Gregory, 1996). When grammatical features common to English (such as gender markings—he/she; specific verb endings, or plurals) are non-existent in the children’s native language, then English Language Learners may skip over these structures in their oral English reading or not read them correctly. Knowing something about the differences in the two languages will help teachers to anticipate and interpret when the child has a decoding problem or when the problem is due to differences in the two languages. Several researchers advise educational personnel to assess the impact of these types of errors on students’ actual comprehension and not on their accurate oral reading of text (García, 1994; Gregory, 1996).

**Question of fluency.** Although fluent oral reading in English is viewed as a characteristic of excellent beginning reading for native-English speakers, due to the pronunciation and syntax problems that English Language Learners sometimes experience, we do not know whether this type of fluency also is a necessary condition for them. If students are able to read fluently in their native language, then their fluency in English may automatically increase as they become more English proficient. By contrast, Jiménez (1997) reported that middle-school Spanish speaking students who only received instruction in English and who were considered poor readers did improve their English reading when their English reading instruction emphasized the oral re-reading of culturally familiar text until they read more fluently. Understanding the source of the oral reading errors that English Language Learners make while reading in English may help teachers to determine whether students need help with fluency.

### **Instructional Issues**

Although instructional implications were mentioned in the previous section, key instructional issues specific to English Language Learners really were not discussed. This section begins with a discussion of why educators usually recommend that English Language Learners in the U.S. be given the opportunity to develop literacy in their native language before they are expected to become literate in English and what this means in terms of exposure to English literacy. Then, four topics are discussed: (a) how to help students transfer information and strategies from the native language to English, (b) how to provide native language support when native language instruction is not possible, (c) how to shelter English reading instruction, and (d) how to improve home-school connections.

### **Rationale for Native-Language Literacy Instruction and Implications for English Literacy Instruction**

There are a number of reasons why many second-language experts recommend that, if at all possible, English Language Learners should be given initial literacy instruction in their native

language. García (in press, b) presents four reasons for providing literacy instruction in the first language. First, native-language literacy instruction usually helps to avoid cognitive confusion about literacy, as well as language and learning delays, which may occur when students are forced to learn new concepts in a language that they do not understand. Second, students who receive native-language literacy instruction can continue to learn about themselves and the world around them without waiting for their English to develop. Once they have acquired English, they are able to apply English labels to the concepts that they already have learned in their native language. Thirdly, students who are literate in the native language have the potential to use knowledge and strategies acquired while reading in the native language to read in English. As already mentioned, there is some evidence that cross-linguistic transfer can help to facilitate the English reading of English Language Learners. Finally, in the U. S., native-language literacy instruction often facilitates students' self esteem and their parents' involvement in their schooling. A school's focus on native-language literacy, especially when students are from a linguistic minority group, demonstrates to students and their parents that their native language and home culture are respected and valued by the school. Also, when parents know that they can use their native language to communicate with educational personnel, then they are much more comfortable participating in their children's education.

Although considerable time and effort needs to be devoted to students' native language literacy development, this does not mean that beginning learners of English cannot be read to in English or be shown the written version of the oral English that they are learning. In fact, young English Language Learners do need access to high quality ESL instruction, which typically integrates English reading, writing, listening, and speaking (see the discussion below on sheltering English reading instruction).

### **Facilitating Cross-Linguistic Transfer**

There is not a whole lot of published research on how to effectively facilitate cross-linguistic transfer in young English Language Learners (García, 2000). We clearly need more research on the types of cross-linguistic information and methods of instruction that are helpful for young English Language Learners at various ages, literacy proficiency levels in the native language, and oral proficiency levels in English.

Discussions with bilingual and ESL teachers have revealed that coordinating English Language Learner's instruction in the native language, ESL, and/or English so that they first learn new concepts in the native language before they are expected to interact with the concepts in English seems to facilitate their English reading comprehension. In an unpublished study, García (1996) reported that fourth-grade Spanish-speaking students were able to use cognate instruction to figure out unknown English vocabulary while reading in English. Battle (1993) and Carger (1993) both found that kindergarten and first-grade Spanish-speaking students improved their engagement with English read alouds and retellings when they were either told what a book was about in Spanish or heard it read in Spanish before hearing it read in English. Several researchers have recommended that teachers should specifically show students how to transfer information and strategies from one language to the other as well as point out similarities and differences in the two languages (García, 1998; Jiménez, 1997). García and Bauer (in press), along with Gregory (1996) recommend that English Language Learners be given the opportunity to hear the same version of a text, or a similar version of a text, read aloud in their native language before they hear it read in English.

### **The Provision of Native Language Support**

Sometimes, native-language instruction is not possible, and native-language support in ESL or all English settings is important. García (in press, b) and García and Bauer (in press) provide recommendations for providing native-language support with young English Language Learners. According to García (in press, b), parents and family members should be encouraged to use their native or dominant language with their children at home. The home is one source of young English Language Learners' oral and conceptual development, and increased oral and conceptual development should help English Language Learners' literacy development (see Tabors & Snow, 2001).

García (in press, b) also recommends that students from similar language backgrounds be placed in the same classrooms together and be allowed to use their native language with each other. Her rationale is based on Saville-Troike's (1984) finding that most of the time that English Language Learners spend speaking in the native language is focused on figuring out what the teacher is saying in English. García also points out that when English Language Learners are grouped together in all-English settings, it reduces their anxiety and makes it easier to pool and use native-language resources, such as materials in the native language, tutors or parent or community volunteers.

García (in press, b) also recommends that parents, community members, or school personnel who speak the native language systematically be invited into the classroom to work on specific activities with the students in their native language. They can read to students in the native language, listen to them read in the native language, help them write letters in the native language to family and friends, or create a photo album with labels in the native language. They also can create a newspaper in the native language, teach other students songs or traditions in the native language, and/or help students to create their own stories or texts in the native language through the Language Experience Approach.

Another one of García's (in press, b) recommendations is the provision of bilingual dictionaries, native-language reference materials, and native-language reading materials in the ESL/all English classroom and school library. Students should be encouraged to use these materials to figure out English instruction and to complete assignments in English. García also recommends that students be given literacy assignments in their native language that they can complete at home.

### **The Sheltering of English Reading Instruction**

A number of excellent texts are available that discuss how teachers can use ESL techniques to shelter or support the English reading instruction of English Language Learners (see the references at the end of the paper). In planning literacy instruction in English for English Language Learners, teachers need to think about how to shelter their use of English so that it is comprehensible, adapt early literacy activities so that they are effective, and use content-based ESL instruction to facilitate the English reading and writing of English Language Learners.

**Sheltering English.** It helps to structure beginning ESL learners' school day so that their anxiety is reduced and they can begin to make sense out of what is happening. For example, García (in press, b) explains that the establishment of a set routine of classroom activities (e.g., taking roll, reviewing the calendar, doing teacher read alouds, holding student-reading conferences, etc.) at a specific time each day, with clear beginnings and endings, allows students to focus on the activity being presented and not to worry about what will happen next.

Posting both the classroom routine with accompanying illustrations or photographs and written labels of classroom objects provides students with ESL instruction and exposure to English print.

Students' comprehension of English usually is improved when teachers use consistent, simplified, clearly enunciated, and slowed down language to introduce literacy activities (such as, teacher read alouds) and assignments (see Peregoy & Boyle, 2001). Accompanying oral speech with gestures, drawings, illustrations, or drama, what frequently is called multiple modalities, also helps. Once it is clear from students' actions and responses that they understand what is being said, then teachers may vary their language, expanding and building on students' comprehension. Allowing students to work in pairs or small groups, especially when students are from varying oral English proficiency levels, often gives them the support and confidence that they need to participate.

**Adapting commonly used literacy activities.** Many of the same literacy activities that are used with monolingual, native-English speakers also can be used with beginning English Language Learners (e.g., adult-child book reading, shared reading, pretend reading, journals, interactive journal writing, guided reading, Language Experience Approach). For example, García and Bauer (in press) point out that English Language Learners can benefit from the repeated readings of predictable texts. However, if the students are not very proficient in English, then it is best to keep the book reading sessions fairly short and to choose engaging texts with illustrations that clearly match the print. Providing a brief preview of the text and using felt figures, props, and gestures to illustrate key vocabulary and actions in the book also can help. When English Language Learners are not literate in the native language or very familiar with adult-child book reading, then asking them personal questions related to the book, rather than story grammar questions, may increase their responses (see Thornburg, 1993). Encouraging the students to chime in when repetitive phrases are read or to participate in choral reading also usually works.

Allowing beginning English Language Learners to draw what they have heard read or to act it out also is one way to assess how much they have understood. García (in preparation) observed one ESL teacher encourage beginning English Language Learners to use their native language to write in their journals or code-mix or code-switch until they were comfortable using English. To get students started, the teacher had students draw a picture, and write about what was in the picture. She then responded briefly in written English to either what the child had written in English or to what the child had drawn.

**Content-based ESL instruction.** One of the most recommended ways to teach English to English Language Learners is through content-based ESL instruction in science or social studies (see Peregoy & Boyle, 2001). Science usually is the preferred topic because it lends itself to a lot of hands-on activities, providing students with the opportunity to see, hear, and experience instruction. Teachers use ESL techniques to shelter students' comprehension of oral language, but focus on a topic from the school's grade-level science curriculum or standards. In the process of presenting instruction on the topic, students acquire oral and written English.

For example, in the following vignette, adapted from an observation in a first-grade ESL classroom, students already had gone on a field trip to see a pond and had observed tadpoles grow into frogs (García, in preparation). During the vignette, the students participated in five different instructional activities, all related to life in/near a pond, over the 90 minutes of ESL instruction.

At the beginning of class, in the first instructional activity, the teacher asked the students to correct a sentence on the board in English about life in a pond ("a pond is a home two meny

animals?"). Next, they wrote the corrected sentence down in their journals. In the second instructional activity, the teacher read the picture book Where is my duckling? aloud to the students, encouraging them to identify the various animals that were in the illustrations.

In the third activity, she asked the students to tell her the names of all of the animals that could live in or near a pond. She listed the animals on the board, according to whether they lived in or near a pond, and either drew or put magnetic illustrations of the animals on the board by the animals' names. As each child volunteered a name, she had the student provide an oral sentence about whether the animal lived in or near a pond. Next, she had pairs of students work together to create two sentences about animals living in, on, or near a pond. The students wrote the sentences in their journals and illustrated them with drawings. In the fourth activity, the teacher reminded students about what they had seen on the field trip and had students volunteer to put magnetic animals on a magnetic drawing of a pond according to whether the animal lived in the pond, on the pond, or near the pond. Once again, she asked students to state orally where their animal lived.

In the fifth instructional activity, the teacher met with small groups of students to read a small, take-home book with illustrations hidden under flaps about animal life in a pond. By this time, the students already had been exposed to almost all of the vocabulary used in the book. The students took turns reading the books aloud individually and in unison with the teacher. When they needed help decoding, she helped them to sound out the words. Throughout she used the "read-stop-read" approach to ask comprehension questions related to what the books said about animal life in a pond.

As the vignette illustrated, when content-based ESL instruction revolves around a theme, it provides students with multiple opportunities to acquire the appropriate background knowledge and vocabulary needed to discuss and read about the theme. Through content-based ESL instruction, students not only have access to the regular science curriculum, but they also acquire English and are engaged in English reading and writing.

### **Making Home-School Connections**

Parents of English Language Learners usually are very interested in their children's schooling, but due to their own second-language status and schooling experiences in other countries, may not always know how to help their children with their homework, especially when it is in English (Goldenberg, 1987). They also may not feel comfortable visiting the school or attending parent-teacher conferences or PTA meetings when they have to use English (see Valdés, 1996). When teachers specifically show them how to work with their children, then they often are able to help their children with early literacy activities (Goldenberg, 1987). Providing information about homework assignments and school activities on voice mail in the native language so that parents may listen to the information at their own convenience also is very helpful.

Inviting parents to help students with classroom activities in their native languages and/or based on their own culture or work indicates to parents that they, their language, and culture are valued (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). Family literacy programs, such as Project Flame, in which the parents attend ESL classes at the same time that they are shown how to support their children's literacy development, have proven effective, as long as they are based on the parents' needs as much as the school's (Shanahan, Mulhern, & Rodriguez-Brown, 1995).

In sum, working with English Language Learners can be challenging but rewarding at the same time. Affective factors that aid teachers in the literacy instruction of young English

Language Learners are the students' high interest in literacy and motivation to acquire English. The students and their parents generally are very appreciative of teachers' instructional efforts.

### **Study Group Activities**

1. After reading the paper and attending the June REA presentations, meet with other teachers who work with English Language Learners to discuss to what extent your observations and experiences match those raised in the paper. Specifically discuss whether differences in how English Language Learners process and respond to text affect the instructional and assessment recommendations presented in the other REA sessions. Jot down the possible differences and spend a week specifically observing how your students process and respond to English text. Meet again to discuss your findings and to decide on which of the REA recommendations are useful, need to be adapted, or ignored.
2. Focus on a specific English Language Learner for a week. Jot down what the child can do orally and in reading and writing (in either the native language and/or in English, depending on the setting). Ask the parents what they think that the child can do in the native language and/or in English. Meet in a focus group to share your findings with other teachers who teach the same children. Specifically talk about the extent to which the children behave the same/differently across the settings. Also, talk about the extent to which your findings illustrate some of the issues/questions raised in this paper.
3. On a typical day of instruction, have your literacy instruction of English Language Learners videotaped. Arrange to meet with other teachers who teach English Language Learners at the same grade level, and who also have videotaped their instruction. Before the meeting, be sure to review the videotape of your instruction and make an outline of literacy objectives, instructional activities, and topics covered. Meet in a focus group to share the outlines and to discuss to what extent you could improve the coordination of literacy instruction across settings. As a group, choose an area of coordination to work on. Meet periodically to review your progress.
4. Review your videotape again and select a 10-minute clip of literacy instruction to share with other teachers who teach at the same grade level (if your instruction is in the native language, be prepared to explain to the other teachers what is occurring during the video clip). Meet as a focus group with the other teachers to view the various video clips of instruction. Share ideas, concerns, resources, questions.
5. Based on the review of outlines and video clips, as a group choose one or two areas in which you want to find out more information. Choose a reading that addresses these questions. Have everyone read the article/chapter, and then meet again to see to what extent some of the questions have been met.
6. Based on the reading of an instructional text (see instructional references below) and/or viewing of videotapes, choose an instructional strategy that you want to try. Keep a handwritten strategy log that indicates what you wanted to try and why, what you did, for how long, and how it worked. If possible, collect examples of students' responses or student work related to the strategy that you tried. Meet with other teachers of English Language Learners to share your strategy logs and student work or responses.
7. Attend a community gathering for English Language Learners or hold one at the school, in which food, dancing, and/or student entertainment are featured. Make sure that parents receive formal invitations and know that they can bring other family members with them to the event. Try to interact with as many parents and children as possible at the

community event. Use the event as an opportunity to get to know the children and their parents outside the school context.

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| <a href="http://www.ed.gov/offices/OBEMLA">http://www.ed.gov/offices/OBEMLA</a> | Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs, Federal Government |
| <a href="http://www.nabe.org/">http://www.nabe.org/</a>                         | National Association for Bilingual Education                                    |
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