Reading Instruction for English Learners

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Introduction

English learners are one of the fastest growing populations in our schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). These students enter school with the challenge of learning a second language that is unfamiliar to them. They are also expected to achieve literacy in the second language which may or may not be similar to the language spoken in their homes. Educators must therefore be prepared to provide language and literacy instruction to this population of students.

Despite limited opportunities for teachers to specialize in teaching reading to English learners, it is likely that they will need to learn the evidence-based practices for their literacy instruction, as approximately 4 million English learners attend public schools. In the United States, the most common home language spoken by English learners is Spanish, which represents 76% of this student population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

The good news is that Spanish, like English, is an alphabetic language. Therefore, many similarities between the languages can be useful to Spanish-speaking English learners. However, teachers must understand the similarities and differences between the languages, and they must explicitly teach the connections if students are to achieve literacy in two languages.

Research

The National Literacy Panel Report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) describes five essential components for literacy instruction: phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. These components should be incorporated into literacy instruction for English learners. However, there are also specific recommendations for English learners, which are described in the report of the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth (August & Shanahan, 2006).

Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is the ability to process and manipulate sounds. Activities that require phonological awareness include rhyming, alliteration, phoneme blending, segmentation, manipulation, and omission. All languages have sounds, and sounds form words. English learners must learn the approximately 44 sounds in the English language. However, 19 sounds in the Spanish and English languages are exactly the same, which means

that Spanish-speaking students who have mastered phonological awareness skills in their native language will likely be able to master phonological awareness skills in English. Figure 1 shows some of the consonant sounds and sound patterns that are similar in Spanish and English (note that there are variations on the pronunciation of /v/ and /y/ in Spanish that may or may not directly transfer).

Figure 1. Similar Consonant Sounds and Sound Patterns in Spanish and English

/b/   /k/   /ch/   /d/   /f/   /g/   /l/   /m/   /n/   /p/   /s/   /t/   /v/   /w/   /ks/   /y/

Students who can manipulate sounds in their native language can do so in their second language. However, instructors must teach the new sounds of English. Figure 2 shows some of the new sounds for Spanish-speaking English learners.

Figure 2. Examples of New English Sounds for Spanish-Speaking English Learners

/ă/   /ĭ/   /ŭ/   /ə/   /ar/   /er/   /or/   /oo/   /sh/   /zh/   /j/   /r/   /kw/   /z/

Therefore, if students can engage in phonological awareness in their native language, such as Spanish, they should be able to demonstrate the same skills in English. However, instruction on the new sounds of the English language is important to the mastery of phonological awareness.

Figure 3. Phonological Awareness Incorporating New Sounds for Spanish-Speaking English Learners

Rhyming	Can you tell me a word that rhymes with *hat*? Yes, the word *cat* rhymes with *hat*.
Alliteration	Say these words that all begin with the same initial sound. Jolly Jerry jumps. What's the common sound? *(The sound is /j/.)* Rosie runs rapidly. What's the common sound? *(The sound is /r/.)*
Sentence Segmentation	Say, "I like to eat bananas." Now say, "I like to eat bananas, without *bananas*." (*I like to eat*) Now say it without the word *eat*. (*I like to*) Now say it without the word *to*. (*I like*) Now say it without the word *like*. (*I*)
Syllable Blending	Say, "/a/ /ni// /mal/." What is the word? (*animal*)
Syllable Segmentation	Say the word *muffin*. Now say the syllables of this word. (*muf-fin*)
Syllable Omission	Say the word *zipper*. Now say *zipper* without /er/. (*zip*)
Phoneme Blending	Say these sounds after me: /r/ /ĭ/ /ng/. What is the word? (*ring*)
Phoneme Segmentation	Tell me the sounds in the word *earth*. (/er/ /th/)
Phoneme Omission	Say the word *truth*. Now say *truth* without /t/. (*ruth*)
Phoneme Manipulation	Say the word *ham*. Change the /h/ to /j/. What is the word? (*jam*)

Phonics

Phonics is a system for teaching students to read words through letter and sound correlations. As languages that are alphabetic share common letters and sounds, teachers should capitalize on the similar patterns across the languages. Many syllable division patterns in the Spanish language are similar in the English language. For example, a VCCV pattern is typically divided between two consonants in both languages. This helps students to read words. However, Spanish-speaking English learners may have difficulty understanding that vowel sounds change in English. Therefore, they must learn the six syllable types of the English language. The syllable types inform students how to read and pronounce words because vowel sounds can differ for each of the syllable types. Patterns such as vowel-consonant and vowel-only are familiar to a Spanish-speaking English learner who can read in their native language. However, patterns such as the vowel-*r* syllable and most of the vowel pair syllables are unfamiliar. Also, the vowel-consonant with the final silent-*e* pattern does not occur in the Spanish language. Spanish speakers, who tend to produce all of the sounds within a word, must learn the syllable-type patterns of English. Teaching the patterns helps them understand that a single letter in the English alphabet can represent more than one sound, and they can then analyze the syllable type to determine the correct pronunciation of the English word.

Although many letter-sound combinations in English are unfamiliar to English language learners, many of them are similar in their native language. Instructors should first teach the familiar letter and sound correlations and then teach the letter and sound combinations that represent a new sound or one that partially transfers. Instruction can then include syllable patterns with the opportunity to practice decoding words and sentences.

Steps for teaching reading to Spanish-speaking English learners:

1. Teach the letters and sounds that directly transfer across languages.
2. Teach the letters and sounds that partially transfer across languages (sound changes).
3. Teach the new letter and sounds correlations that do not transfer across languages.
4. Teach the six syllable types of the English language and practice decoding texts.

Fluency

Fluent readers are those who can read as if they are speaking to a friend. That is, they can read smoothly and demonstrate the proper phrasing and intonation patterns. It is a common misconception that fluency refers to only the ability to read quickly. Fluency is actually the ability to read accurately at an appropriate rate, with prosody (i.e., expression).

Selection of Text

English learners should be able to read a text at an independent level for fluency practice.

Rate and Accuracy

English learners can practice reading independent-level text and work on improving the number of words read correctly per minute.

Prosody

English learners can benefit from fluency instruction. They need to understand the particular phrasing that is different in English than in their home language. Pencil swing markings within sentences can help English learners

understand how to phrase sentences in English. In addition, having a native-English-speaking partner model a reading passage is helpful. Highlighting the punctuation marks is also beneficial, as it can remind English learners that, for example, their voice rises when they see a question mark. Such patterns or rules may differ in their native language.

Instructional Considerations for Fluency Development of English Learners

- Choose books or texts that are familiar to English learners. Books that exist in a speaker's native language and in English help them with the familiarity of the concepts.

- Provide ample opportunity for students to read the same text. Repeated readings assist English learners with their fluency. They can familiarize themselves with the content and focus on improving their rate, accuracy, and prosody.

- Have English learners practice phrasing by first using pencil swings under each of the phrases within the sentences. This provides English learners with a visual representation of the particular phrasing that is unfamiliar to them. Also, provide a reading partner who can model a passage and practice reading the text with them.

- Have students rehearse and prepare for reading. Record their reading and have them listen to it for feedback.

- Meet with the students and graph their reading fluency progress in the areas of accuracy, rate, and prosody to help them improve their reading fluency skills.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is the body of words that one can understand and use. English learners need multiple opportunities to use words to understand them. It is well known that students from language-rich home environments are at a greater advantage for vocabulary development than those from homes in which fewer words are used. Reading books can increase vocabulary knowledge. However, English learners need better access to books at their level of English development. Teachers must therefore understand how to scaffold language so students understand the words and the content. The good news is that Spanish-speaking English learners can use their native language as a resource. Many words in Spanish have cognates in the English language. Cognates are words that are similar in spelling and meaning. Teachers must become familiar with cognates as they help English learners develop their English vocabulary.

Figure 4. Examples of Cognates in English and Spanish

English	Spanish
facile	fácil
placate	aplacar
adorable	adorable
terrible	terrible
camera	cámara
cafeteria	cafetería

Teachers can encourage Spanish-speaking English learners to think about the word in their native language and determine whether it can serve as a resource for the meaning of the word in English. This strategy can be useful. Teachers can also have students notice the spelling patterns of a word and note the similarities and differences in the pronunciation of the word in the respective languages. Practicing this strategy on a routine basis helps students when they encounter words that are unfamiliar to them.

Helping English learners to develop morphological awareness is another strategy for building vocabulary. Morphemes, such as prefixes, roots, and suffixes, are the smallest units of meaning in a language. Teaching the meanings of morphemes helps students build their vocabulary. Thousands of English words are derived from Latin roots, which are useful resources for Spanish-speaking English learners. Figure 5 contains some of the most common prefixes, roots, and suffixes in English and Spanish. Teaching these word parts helps English language learners with vocabulary development.

Figure 5. Examples of Morphemes Similar in English and Spanish

English Prefix	Spanish Prefix
anti-	anti-
bi-	bi-
re-	re-
sub-	sub-
super-	super-
tri-	tri-

English Root	Spanish Root
audi	audi
auto	auto
dict	dict
graph	graf
phone	fono
vis	vis

English Suffix	Spanish Suffix
-able	-able
-ance	-ancia
-ist	-ista
-itis	-itis
-ness	-ura
-ous	-oso

Steps for Explicit Vocabulary Development With English Learners

1. See, say, and write the word or word part.
2. Determine whether the word or word part exists in native language.
3. Determine the meaning using examples and/or nonexamples.
4. Use pictures or drawings for visual representations.
5. Have a discussion about the word or word part.
6. Determine what is known or unknown about the word or word part.
7. Create a friendly or simple definition.
8. Create opportunities to use words.

Comprehension

Comprehension is the ability to understand what one reads. It is the ultimate goal of reading. English learners at the beginning stages of reading are not able to focus on the meaning of the text. They need to be able to read the words accurately and fluently to be able to pay close attention to the meaning of what they read.

The National Reading Panel (2000) has described the most effective strategies for reading comprehension. To remember the strategies, teachers can use the acronym 3PV, 3RQ.

Rationale for 3PV, 3RQ

Purpose helps students understand what and why they are reading, which in turn helps them focus on the content or topic.

Prepare a connection activates students' prior knowledge and helps them make a connection by asking questions or demonstrating a new concept. This is the time to learn about English learners' conceptual knowledge and their labels for key ideas.

Prediction is where teachers have students look at pictures, subtitles, or headings and then ask questions to determine whether students can predict the main idea of the corresponding passage.

Vocabulary involves exploring the meanings of specific words that will assist students in comprehending the text. Remember to emphasize words that are cognates or that have word parts that are familiar to students. Use graphic organizers to explore word meanings and help students determine their relationships to other words.

Read the text and help students to understand the structure of the text. Ask students whether the passage is an expository text that gives information or a narrative text that tells a story. Ask them whether the text structure is persuasive or compares and contrasts two persons, places, or things. This helps students to read the text with more purpose and understanding.

Retelling provides students with opportunities to use their second language and demonstrate understanding of the text.

Review what students read and then have them prepare some questions or even review the questions that they will be asked.

Question generation and question answering can assist students with comprehension of text. English learners need much practice creating grammatically correct questions.

Summary

English learners can benefit from literacy instruction that incorporates the essential components of phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

However, instructors need to take extra steps to facilitate second language literacy development. Understanding the similarities and differences between a native language and English is important because literacy knowledge in a native language serves as the foundation for second language literacy development.

Resources

Center for Applied Linguistics
www.cal.org

Center on Instruction
www.centeroninstruction.org

Colorín Colorado
www.colorincolorado.org

References

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