

Essential Information for Education Policy

Research Points

English Language Learners: Boosting Academic Achievement

Beyond the debate over bilingual versus English-only education, the fundamental question remains: What are the best ways to teach English literacy to English language learners, and what rate of achievement in English is realistic to expect?

Thirty-six years ago, the nation adopted an ambitious program to address the needs of the growing number of children entering U.S. schools with limited or no English.¹ The goal was to help children learn to speak and read English as quickly as possible, rather than to preserve or enhance native language abilities.

The ranks of children who need extra help learning English have burgeoned in recent decades. Almost 4 million public school children — nearly one in 12 — received special assistance to learn English in 2001–2002, according to the U.S. Department of Education.² While three-quarters of these pupils speak Spanish, hundreds of thousands come from homes where other languages are spoken. Based on the 2000 Census, the Census Bureau estimated that 3.4 million children ages 5 to 17 do not speak English or do not speak it well. The majority — 2.7 million — are in “linguistically isolated households,” where no one over the age of 14 speaks English very well.³

Current research provides guidance about how to most effectively teach literacy to this

varied population of learners — whether in English-only classes, dual-language programs, or other variants. Of primary importance, the research makes clear that “reading” is not one simple capability. It is a complex task that requires children to master two separate skills: recognizing (or “decoding”) the words and understanding what the text says. Furthermore, ability to understand written English is intertwined with proficiency in spoken English.

Recognizing the Words

English learners, like other children, can learn quickly to decode words on a page. With skilled, explicit instruction, many children who start school speaking little or no English can gain word reading and spelling skills equal to those of native speakers in two years. The most successful approaches usually include:

- ▶ Systematic training in kindergarten to develop children’s phonological awareness (the ability to distinguish and manipulate sounds);
- ▶ Lots of practice reading;

- ▶ Explicit instruction in phonics (how letters stand for sounds and how sounds combine into words); and
- ▶ Frequent in-class assessments to identify children who are falling behind and need more help.

According to several studies, English language learners can acquire basic English word reading skills relatively quickly when schools use systematic approaches to teaching reading in early grades. One such approach is the *Success for All* curriculum, which pairs group instruction with individual tutoring. In a Philadelphia study, children from low-income Asian families who began *Success for All* in kindergarten were reading nearly at grade level by the end of first grade.⁴

More recently, researchers followed almost 1,000 English language learners from kindergarten through second grade in North Vancouver, Canada. Those who started kindergarten behind their classmates were doing as well as or better than their peers on word identification, spelling, and a simple reading comprehension task by second grade.⁵ Another study found that with skillful instruction, second-grade English language learners who had weak phonological skills — such as lacking the ability to identify matching sounds and delete phonemes (e.g., saying “Fred” without the “ffff” sound to make the word “red”) — nevertheless could make as much progress in spelling as native speakers.⁶

Understanding What the Text Says

The second part of becoming a proficient reader — developing the vocabulary and comprehension skills needed to understand the meaning of texts — is much harder and takes longer. Understanding written texts depends on gaining competence in spoken English. Many kindergarten and first-grade English language learners can pick up enough oral language basics to converse informally in English with classmates in a casual setting such as a playground. To an informal observer, a young student engaging in social conversations in English might seem to be a competent speaker.

But most English language learners lag well behind classmates in the oral language skills necessary for success in reading and in higher academic achievement. It takes at least several years to acquire the skills necessary to speak with confidence and comprehension in the classroom on academic subjects. This higher-level competence is sometimes called “academic English”

and is directly connected to reading comprehension. Academic English includes the ability to read, write, and engage in substantive conversations about math, science, history, and other school subjects.

VOCABULARY

English language learners will never catch up with native speakers unless they develop a rich vocabulary. Native speakers typically know at least 5,000 to 7,000 English words before kindergarten⁷ — a huge vocabulary, as anyone who has struggled to learn a second language knows. English language learners not only must close that initial gap, but also keep pace with the native speakers as they steadily expand their vocabularies.

The vocabulary of academic language goes well beyond that used in most social conversations. It is only through structured talk about academically relevant content that students will learn the words needed to engage in class discussions and to comprehend what they read in various subjects. Memorizing word lists rarely works. Words must be learned and used in context. Whether children read a book on their own or listen to a “read aloud,” what is important is that teachers have deliberate strategies for clarifying word meanings and that children have opportunities to use those words in context.

Children have to talk as well as listen, but in structured and supported ways.⁸ Group science experiments, carefully chosen videos, and other activities besides book reading also can provide the content for vocabulary development. In all such discussions, the way the teacher leads the conversation has to be adapted to the children’s level of English development.⁹

READING COMPREHENSION

Teachers also should explicitly teach students the skills they need to engage with texts and to comprehend their meaning.¹⁰ Research has identified a number of strategies that readers can use to help them understand a text,¹¹ but the strategies should not be taught as ends in themselves. It is important to keep readers’ attention focused on what the text itself says.¹² For English language learners, special attention to vocabulary and syntax — word order, grammar, and other elements of phrase and sentence formation — may help comprehension. This might include “pre-teaching” of vocabulary that students may not know, then explaining word meanings again while actually discussing the text focus of the reading.

Discussion of Text Is Crucial to Reading Comprehension

Students must talk about what they read, and teachers must learn special skills for guiding this talk. Here is an example from a “read aloud” with third-grade students.

Teacher: I am going to read you some sentences from the book, and I am going to ask you to tell me what a word means in a sentence. Here is the word “foot.” That is the word I want you to think about.

He was glad that he lived so high up because he could look down on the broad, blue ocean at the foot of the mountain.

Foot of the mountain. What do you think foot of the mountain means? Ricky, what does foot of the mountain mean do you think? Do you think the mountain has feet?

Ricky: No.

Teacher: No. Okay, probably not. Do you have some ideas?

Kenny: Top or bottom.

Teacher: So what do you think it is?

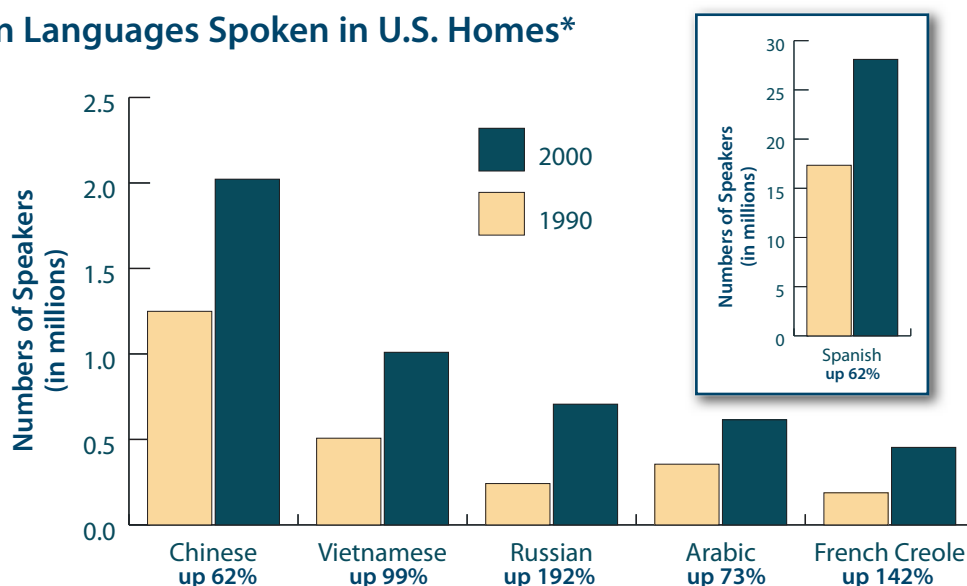
Kenny: The bottom.

Teacher: Very good. That is exactly what it means. Your feet are at the bottom of your body, right? And when people say the foot of a mountain, it means the bottom of a mountain.¹³

Fastest Growing Foreign Languages Spoken in U.S. Homes*

Noteworthy

While about three-quarters of students who receive special assistance to learn English speak Spanish, hundreds of thousands come from homes where other languages are spoken, according to the U.S. Department of Education. The wide variety of languages can make bilingual instruction a difficult proposition.



* Languages with more than 250,000 speakers.
Figure adapted from U.S. Census Bureau. Census 2000 Summary File 3.

Facts at a Glance

The Critical Components of Reading Instruction for English Language Learners

- ▶ **Word recognition (phonics):** With explicit instruction, English language learners can acquire skills equivalent to native speakers in two to three years.
- ▶ **Vocabulary:** English language learners start with many fewer words than native speakers, and the gap can grow during schooling without intervention.
- ▶ **Comprehension:** English language learners, like other students, need to be taught strategies for making sense of the texts they read.
- ▶ **Speech:** Most English language learners lag behind classmates in oral language skills necessary for success in reading and in higher academic achievement.

Conclusion

Children who start school knowing little or no English can learn the basic skills of word recognition quickly—in about two years, if they are carefully taught. They need the same kind of reading instruction that works for native speakers, only more of it, and they need to be monitored carefully so they get help adapted to their language development needs as soon as they run into problems. Kindergarten and first-grade classes should be structured in ways that help children acquire these skills, regardless of whether the English language learners are in regular classes or in special sections.

Although students can learn basic English reading skills in two years, their chances of failing later in school are still greater than native English speaking children. Even if excellent oral language support is provided in the primary grades, it takes far longer than two years for English language learners to become as fluent as native speakers and to acquire the broad vocabulary and reading comprehension skills needed for sustained academic achievement. Successful English learning requires targeted and continuing intervention.

There is no evidence that this extra teaching can be effectively offered in “pullout” programs that are not closely integrated with the main literacy program. Lengthening the school day and/or year for these students is one way to close the gap. Teachers’ skills also make a big difference. English language learners need teachers who can deliver the intense, explicit, and supportive reading instruction shown to be most effective, and these teachers need intensive professional development.

Providing additional time, and ensuring that each child receives expert instruction, is expensive. But students cannot learn what they are not taught. Transforming English language learners into good readers and academic achievers requires increased resources and commitment, both from those who run the schools and from the citizens and communities that pay for them.

What Should Policymakers Do?

First, give English language learners extra time and instruction in literacy, either through longer school days or extended years.

Second, assign the best teachers to English learners and provide professional development in effective teaching strategies.

Third, use proven techniques for teaching basic word recognition skills, including phonics and phonological awareness.

Fourth, provide lots of practice reading and frequent assessments to pinpoint children’s reading strengths and weaknesses.

Fifth, provide structured academic conversation, built around books and other subject matter activities to build vocabulary and comprehension.

Sixth, provide several years of intensive, high-quality instruction to help students master the vocabulary, comprehension, and oral language skills that will make them fully fluent in speaking, reading, and writing English.

Bibliography

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- 3) *Language Use and English-Speaking Ability: 2000*, Census 2000 Brief, U.S. Bureau of the Census, C2KBR-29, October 2003, and “Age by Language Spoken at Home by Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 Years and Over,” Census 2000 Summary File 3 (SF 3).
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