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# Relationship Between Oral Language and Reading Comprehension for English Learners: A Systematic Review

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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORAL LANGUAGE AND READING  
COMPREHENSION FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

by

Jenna Varghese

A Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in English as a Second Language

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

May 2015

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**To my savior Jesus Christ, my husband, and my family**

*Thank you for loving, supporting and sustaining me through this process.*

**To my students**

*You teach me more than I could ever teach you. For that I am grateful.*

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The journey an English learner (EL) takes towards English literacy and oral language proficiency is a critical one. Acquiring high levels of English literacy has the power to lift an individual out of their current circumstances transforming the future for themselves, their families and their communities. Many elementary-age students are charged with the difficult tasks of learning to read, write, and speak in English. This literacy journey is likely to be complex and influenced by a variety of factors.

Educators now have the additional responsibility of designing instruction that meet the needs of a wide range of learners, which includes a growing number of students who are learning English as a new language. Teachers must be aware of the various factors that influence literacy development for ELs and what research deems are best practices for literacy instruction. This includes understanding how learning to read in a second language is the same as or different from reading in a first language, how sociocultural and psychological factors influence learning to read, how linguistic features of a student's home language can help or hinder learning to read in English and what are considered to be effective language and literacy practices that lead to high levels of educational achievement for ELs (Helman, 2009b).

In order to gain a firm grasp on the literature that has guided literacy instruction for ELs and to make sound decisions for future scholarship and pedagogy, it is important to carefully review what researchers have found to date. A systematic review of research is in order to move our field forward thoughtfully. The current review is guided by the following questions:



- 1) What is the relationship between English oral language proficiency and English reading comprehension for English learners at the transitional stage of reading?
- 2) What additional factors make it difficult for transitional readers to progress out of this stage?

### Significance of the Research

The significance of this research is a personal one. These research questions emerged out of the need for my colleagues and me to find out how best to help the English learners at our school move through the transitional reading stages more successfully by improving their reading comprehension. We noticed that many of the ELs seemed stagnant in their literacy growth and remained at the transitional stage longer than their native peers. The transitional stage of reading is regarded as the stage where readers have many of the skills developed in the emergent and beginning stages of reading in place and are moving or “transitioning” into applying these skills to longer, more difficult texts. ELs often require extra instructional support at this stage due to their inability to contend with the increasing language and text demands.

The topic of the relationship between English oral language development and its role in English reading comprehension for ELs became of interest to me when conversations at my school seemed to suggest English learners at the transitional stage of reading appeared to be stagnant in their reading growth at this level. Much of their difficulty appeared to be in the area of reading comprehension. This difficulty with

reading comprehension and limited English oral language seemed to be a constant topic of conversation and an emerging theme in our work.

Literacy assessments continued to confirm that the greatest area of difficulty was in the area of comprehension for many of the ELs at this stage. We surmised that there must be a relationship between the still developing oral language proficiency and the lack of comprehension. We determined that the biggest need was for more English oral language instruction. We concluded that if their English oral language improved so would their ability to comprehend text. I endeavored to find out if this was indeed the case and if our recommendations would ensure continued literacy progress of our English learners.

My principal regularly gathered together classroom teachers, reading specialists, special education teachers, and English language teachers to discuss our concerns about particular students. Many of them were ELs who appeared to not be making the gains in literacy we expected. We would often analyze the literacy data and discuss what types of literacy support the child was currently receiving. We then would have lengthy deliberations about what additional literacy supports seemed to be the most appropriate given the EL's needs. After all possible literacy services had been exhausted, the team would even occasionally contemplate a possible special education referral in order to identify potential learning disabilities.

After participating in so many of these conversations, I began to notice a trend. Many of these students of concern had three things in common: they were currently receiving English language support, their English oral language proficiency still was not

fully developed, and they were struggling in the area of reading comprehension at the transitional stage. I began to wonder if there was a relationship between English oral language proficiency and the ability to comprehend text.

Many times in our consultation meetings at school we concluded that these English learners were struggling with reading comprehension as a result of their limited English oral language. Our recommendations would often be to increase their oral language instruction from the English language teacher and give them more time to develop as English-speakers. However, our final conclusions were conjectures at best with no real research to substantiate our recommendations.

I began to wonder what the research had to say about the relationship between English oral language and English reading comprehension for English learners. I needed to understand more about the process that English learners go through when acquiring English oral language. I also needed to know more about the characteristics of the transitional stage of reading. This included understanding the challenges with this particular stage, the skills needed in order to move through the transitional stage of reading, and the instructional practices that would ensure that these students would continue to progress to higher levels of comprehension.

#### Student Vignettes

English learners should not be treated as a homogenous group—for they all come to school with varying linguistic, educational, psychological, and sociocultural backgrounds. The following student vignettes, based on students our school has served,

provide grounding examples of the varied ELs' journeys toward high levels of English literacy.

#### Student #1 (Carlos)

Carlos immigrated to Minnesota with his family from El Salvador at the end of his second grade year. In El Salvador, he attended school in a rural town and received literacy instruction in Spanish. However, it is unclear how consistently he attended school or what quality of education he received in his home country. His oral English proficiency is at the early intermediate stages of oral language proficiency. He speaks only English at school and Spanish is the only language spoken in the home. He has a basic use of English, but still has difficulty understanding classroom instruction and expressing his thoughts and ideas. Carlos often avoids talking and participating in class. It is difficult to accurately assess his native literacy skills in Spanish because formal Spanish literacy assessment materials are not available at school. His English literacy assessments show that he is now entering the transitional stage of reading. He is two years behind his native speaking peers in literacy and is progressing slowly. His rate of literacy progress is beginning to slow as he encounters more text at the transitional level of reading. He has shown that he can read many of the words found in an easy transitional text, but has difficulty comprehending the meaning of and explaining his thinking about the text.

#### Student #2 (David)

David moved to Minnesota at the beginning of his second grade year from Kenya. He was fortunate to attend a high quality school in Kenya where the medium of

instruction was both English and Swahili. He received literacy instruction mostly in English while living in Kenya. Due to his exposure to both English and Swahili in school, home, and in his community, he can communicate in both languages. His oral English proficiency is at an intermediate level and his literacy is developing quite quickly. He still lacks the characteristic features of more advanced English, but he is able to expand his language knowledge and use through EL support easily. After two years in our school, he is moving quickly through the transitional stage of reading and is almost at grade level with his peers in literacy. He is able to comprehend a variety of texts on varying topics and explain his thinking adequately. He likely will exit from the English learner program by the end of the fourth grade.

#### Students # 3 (Ahmed/Abdi)

Ahmed and Abdi are twins who immigrated to the United States from Yemen during their fourth grade year. They were forced to resettle to various refugee camps in Yemen because of the dangerous political situation in Somalia. Living as Somali refugees, they had few opportunities to attend school and had no experience with literacy in any language. Ahmed and Abdi, however, do demonstrate a remarkable strength for learning language and are able to speak Somali, Arabic and now English. They are now taking on language found at the intermediate stage of oral proficiency but still lack more advanced English skills. Through extensive EL support, they have acquired emergent and beginning literacy skills. However, their lack of background knowledge appears to severely impact their understanding of text. It is quite difficult for them to answer

comprehension questions regarding the text due to their still developing English oral language.

#### Student #4 (Fadumo)

Fadumo is a second generation Somali speaker born in Minnesota. The predominant language spoken at home is Somali. She attended a predominantly Somali speaking charter school in Minnesota for kindergarten. When she arrived at her new English speaking school at the beginning of first grade, she had very limited English language proficiency and even lower skills in literacy. Through the English learner program, Fadumo has received extensive language instruction at school and is considered an intermediate speaker of English. She has also received intensive literacy interventions in school and even receives outside academic tutoring. She is often described as a “word caller” or a student who can read most of the words on the page but has no idea what she read. Fadumo has been in the English learner program now for three years, but her literacy skills remain significantly behind her peers. She has remained at the transitional stage of reading now for three years and is not making the progress we would expect. Her lack of progress in literacy is of great concern and her EL and classroom teachers have been grappling with how to move her forward in her literacy development.

\*Names have been changed.

#### Overview of Chapters

Chapter One introduces the personal significance of the research as well as the as the questions that are guiding the systematic review. A number of student vignettes are included that highlight the various journeys ELs take to acquire literacy in a second

language. Chapter Two provides a review of the relevant scholarship related to the research questions. This chapter includes a discussion about the rationale for using a systematic review approach, and it presents the theoretical framework, or the lens, through which the systematic review has been conducted. It also provides definitions to key terminology related to these topics. Theories related to language development, developmental stages of reading and reading comprehension are also discussed in order to lay the foundation for future chapters.

In Chapter Three, the definition and steps for carrying out a systematic review are presented along with the purposes and goals of this review. The research questions are stated followed by a discussion of how boundaries were set for the questions. Then, a description of the method for carrying out the comprehensive search is explained and inclusion and exclusion criteria are presented. The manner and methods used in gathering and appraising the quality and relevance of studies are also discussed. Finally, the method for data collection, extraction, and synthesis is explained.

In Chapter Four, I present the major findings in the literature surveyed. Finally, in Chapter Five, I end with a reflection and discussion about my professional growth as a teacher. I also provide teachers with research-based instructional implications and recommendations gathered as a result of this systematic review.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this systematic review is to examine the current literature and extrapolate themes and major findings. The results of the review will then be used to make instructional recommendations for teachers. The questions guiding this systematic review are:

- 1) What is the relationship between English oral language proficiency and English reading comprehension for English learners?
- 2) What additional factors make it difficult for transitional readers to progress through this stage?

### Rationale for Using a Systematic Review Approach

A systematic review is a process often used by researchers in the sciences. However, systematic reviews have also been helpful in the areas of literacy and second language acquisition to help an individual develop a vigorous method to find answers to their questions. A systematic review begins like all studies, by an individual formulating review questions that they hope to answer by the end of the review. They then develop a rigorous and methodical review protocol to help limit the amount of material being reviewed. The researcher then carries out a comprehensive search by applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria to the sources while also assessing the quality and usefulness of the source. This further limits the number of sources being reviewed.

The researcher then extracts the sources he/she feels will be helpful in answering the review questions. He or she undergoes a formal process for bringing together different types of evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, so that others can be clear



about what is already known from the research. The researcher then synthesizes the research and shares the findings.

A systematic review approach to answering the current research questions is an intentional choice and is fitting for many reasons, some pragmatic and other professional. A significant amount of research already exists regarding the development of English oral language in English learners and its relationship to reading comprehension. This is research which can, if thoughtfully synthesized, be made accessible and useful to practicing EL teachers. By having a strong grasp of the current research, EL teachers can better work with their EL and mainstream colleagues by pointing to research that supports recommendations for the English learners in our daily care. Given the nature of the questions and the amount of research already conducted on these learners, a systematic review is the ideal approach to answering the research questions at hand.

### Terminology

Before moving too far into the discussion on the relationship between second language oral proficiency and reading comprehension, it is important that key words used throughout this paper be clearly defined. English learner, first language, second language, bilingualism/bilingual, and oral language proficiency are defined below. The various definitions of reading comprehension are discussed later in this chapter.

#### English Learner

The federal definition of an English learner (EL) used by public schools throughout the United States is always an individual who is or will be attending an elementary or secondary school. These students may have been born in the United States

or may have been born outside the United States. They may be of Native American or Alaskan native descent. They may be from a migrant family who is highly transient. The student comes from an environment where a language other than English is spoken or is dominant and this environment has a significant impact on the student's level of English language proficiency in the areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Because of the impact on their level of English proficiency, these students may not be able to meet the state's proficiency level of achievement on state assessments, to successfully achieve in the classroom where the language of instruction is English or have the opportunity to fully participate in society (Public Law 107-110, Title IX, Part A, Sec. 9101, (25)).

#### First Language (L1) and Second Language (L2)

A child's first language, also referred to as the primary or native language, is the language a student has been exposed to from infancy in the home and as part of their ethnic community. It is the language that the child first learned to understand and speak. The first language is often represented using the abbreviation L1. Any additional language that the child learns, whether it be the child's second, third or fourth, is referred to as the second language or the L2. For this paper, L2 refers to the target language of the current teaching context, the English language.

#### Bilingualism/Bilingual

At first glance, one may think that because of the prefix "bi," bilingualism simply means the individual's ability to speak two languages. However, bilingualism or multilingualism is much more complex than that. There are over thirty-two terms that describe the order in which the individual acquired those two (or more) languages and the

degree of the individual's knowledge, proficiency and use of those languages.

Bilingualism can be thought of as existing on a continuum (Gass, 2013). For this paper, a bilingual child is defined as someone who has acquired or is in the process of acquiring two or more languages and has some degree of proficiency in both.

### Oral Language Proficiency

Oral language proficiency plays an important role in the acquisition of literacy specifically with reading comprehension. Oral language proficiency includes both receptive and expressive skills and includes the knowledge or use of specific aspects of oral language including phonology (knowledge of the sounds of English), rhythm and cadence, vocabulary, syntax (word order), language forms (structures, verb tenses, grammar) functions of language used for both social and academic purpose, formal and informal discourse styles for speaking and writing, cultural contexts, and pragmatic skills (Lesaux and Geva, 2006; Dutro & Helman, 2009).

### Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is best described as the lens or glasses the researcher looks through when reviewing research. Literacy development is complicated and has many factors that work together to either help or hinder the literacy development process for English Learners. For this reason, Helman's (2009b) Factors that Affect Second Language Literacy Development model will serve as the guide for this systematic review. This framework groups the various factors that affect the development of literacy development for English learners into four main categories: linguistic, sociocultural, psychological and educational factors.

## Helman's Factors that Affect Second Language Literacy Development

For ELs, the journey of attaining high levels of literacy is a complex one filled with many challenges. All of these factors have the ability to either help or hinder the intricate process of learning to read and write in a language that students are still learning to speak. Schools must provide extra attention and support for those students whose linguistic, sociocultural, psychological, and educational experiences may be different from that of a native English speaking student or whose experiences do not adequately prepare them for the challenges and expectations they face at school (Helman, 2009b).

Figure 1 shows the four major factors along with related sub factors that affect the development of literacy for ELs.

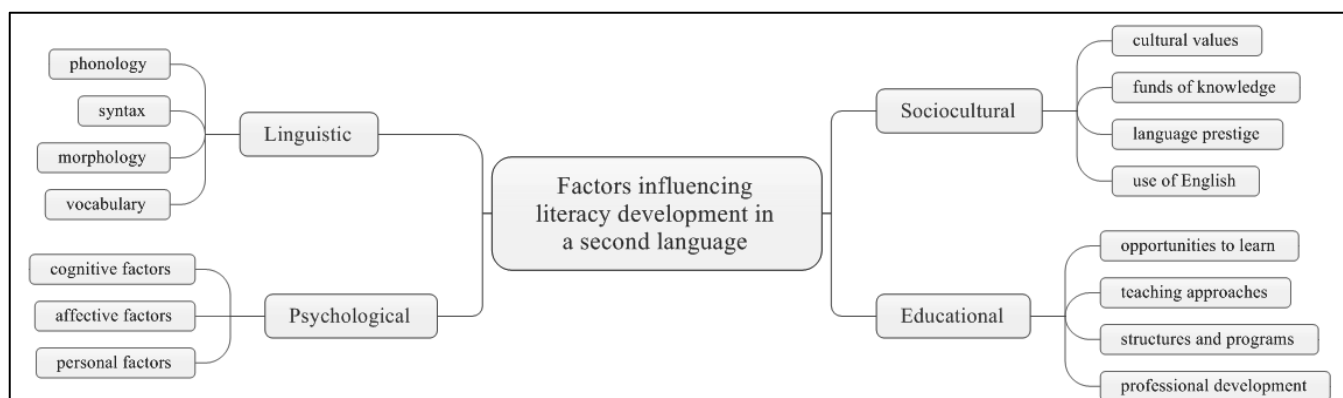


Figure 1. Factors Influencing Second-Language Literacy Development. Adapted from "Factors Influencing Second-Language Literacy Development," by L. Helman, 2009, p.4. Literacy Development with English Learners. Copyright 2009 by the Guildford Press.

Linguistic factors can be thought of the areas of language that may affect literacy development. These subcomponents are the phonology, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary of the English language. Phonology refers to the set of sounds that are used to create words. Students bring with them an awareness of the sounds of their native language, but must also learn the sounds used in English. Morphology refers to the

groups of letters that carry meaning within words such as plural –s morpheme and past tense –ed morpheme. Syntax refers to the way that words are put together in phrases and sentences. Vocabulary refers to the meaning of individual words in English.

Sociocultural factors consist of the subcomponents of cultural values, funds of knowledge, language prestige, and use of English that have an effect on literacy development. Much of these factors are based on sociocultural theory. Cultural values are the values that are predominant in a student's ethnic community. Many times the cultural norms a student brings to school are different than the social norms and values at school. Funds of knowledge refer to the student's knowledge and background experiences. When teachers see their language, family heritage and abilities as assets, they are empowered to be successful at school. Language prestige and use of English refers to the societal status of a student's home language as compared to English.

Psychological factors include the subcomponents of cognitive and affective factors as well as personal idiosyncrasies. Psychological factors can be conceptualized as those factors that are going on in the memory brain and emotions. Some important cognitive factors that contribute to a student's literacy development include the student's eye movements, brain functioning, and memory. Affective factors and personal idiosyncrasies such as a child's motivation, age, and personality have a role in the development of literacy for ELs as well.

Educational factors also contribute positively or negatively to the literacy development for ELs. These factors include and EL's opportunities to learn, the teaching approaches that are used to instruct ELs, the structures and programs that are put in place

to support their literacy development, as well as the professional development that may or may not be in place to help teachers learn best practices for working with ELs in the areas of literacy and language development.

### Importance of Affirming Native Language

It is important to note that affirming a student's native language in the classroom is powerful and has been shown to positively affect literacy development for ELs.

Although many ELs are coming to school with limited language proficiency in English and other significant influences that may make school more challenging for them, they still have a substantially developed first language. They have knowledge about how language works. They may even have quite developed literacy skills in their native language.

Often times, a child's native language and literacy skills are overlooked in the classroom. However, a student's native language, literacy skills and experiences are assets that they bring to the classroom and can contribute to their literacy development in English. The teacher's task is to help children make links between what they can already do with their native language and the new challenges of learning to read and speak English in school (Clay, 1991).

Quality instructional approaches for English learners involve having a variety of classroom and school wide structures, as well as effective teaching approaches. EL programs that affirm a student's native language have been shown to be effective. Programs that promote biliteracy, reading in both English and the student's native language, and bilingualism through sustained instruction in the home language have been

show to promote academic achievement for ELs (Helman, 2009b). For many schools, providing native language literacy instruction is not possible within their current program models. However, research has shown that instructional practices that build on a student's bilingual experiences such as instruction in the first language, translation, and cross-linguistic bridging are effective for ELs (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005). Affirming a child's first language not only promotes academic achievement, but also his/her identity as a learner.

By becoming aware of ELs unique linguistic, sociocultural, psychological and educational needs, teachers, and schools have the opportunity to design instructional settings for literacy learning that build upon and utilize their varying strengths in the classroom.

### Bilingualism and Learning to Read

For English learners living in a multilingual environment, there is often a difference between the home language and the language used at school. These English learners typically acquire these two languages successively. The first language develops within the context of the home and the surrounding ethnic community. The second language (English) gradually enters through the influence of the television, contact with peers, daycare and eventually as the child enters school. The language input that these English learners receive at school is almost entirely second-language input from lessons in English and peer and teacher interactions in English. As mentioned earlier, there is often a mismatch between the linguistic abilities that English learners bring to the classroom and the language and literacy curriculum of the school (Verhoeven, 2011).

Both native English speaking children and English learners are constantly developing their oral language skills while at school; however, an important difference between the language acquisition of monolingual speaking children and bilingual children is that bilingual children are exposed to two different linguistic systems and they must navigate them both (Verhoeven, 2011).

Monolingual children must master a set of linguistic abilities that are grounded in an underlying system of background cultural knowledge. These linguistic abilities include phonological abilities related to the discrimination and production of speech sounds, lexical abilities related to receptive and productive vocabulary, syntactic abilities related to sentence processing and text abilities related to the cohesion and coherence of different types of text. For bilingual English learners, these abilities must be mastered in two language systems. There is a growing amount of research that shows that there is a great deal of transfer from an English learner's L1 linguistic system to their knowledge of the L2 linguistic system which can facilitate the language learning process of English (Verhoeven, 2011).

For English learners, acquiring literacy in a second language is a complex task. They must master the structure and functions of literacy in a largely unfamiliar language, sometimes acquiring literacy for the very first time.



## Components of Reading

The National Literacy Panel (2000) states that effective literacy programs for both English learners and native English speakers offer instruction in the following areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary instruction. However, it is interesting to note that few studies recommend oral language development instruction as part of an effective literacy program. For ELs, oral language plays a particularly important role in reading success, especially in the area of comprehension, and should be considered an essential part of every literacy program for students developing English and literacy skills.

### Oral Language Proficiency Levels

ELs come to school with wide range of oral language knowledge. Some enter school with little to no English while others come to school with quite developed English. Their proficiency level is measure by using a standard language. Common assessments used throughout the United States are the K Model (Kindergarten Model of Developing English Language) and the W-APT (WIDA ACCESS Placement Test). Table 1 below shows the oral language proficiency levels ranging from beginning to advanced as well as their characteristics.

Table 1 English Proficiency Levels and Objectives

<b>Proficiency Level</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Objectives for student language use</b>
Beginning to early intermediate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Progress from having little receptive or productive English to basic use</li> <li>-Have limited use of written English, primarily using high-frequency words and previously learned materials</li> <li>-Need many repetitions and concrete experiences to internalize vocabulary, sentence patterns and concepts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Move from nonverbal to single-word or short-phrases responses to longer oral responses</li> <li>-Replicate language structures that have been taught and practiced, such as survival, functional vocabulary, preset, progressive, or negative verbs and descriptive adjectives</li> </ul>
Intermediate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Comprehend information on familiar topics and can engage in expanded conversations</li> <li>-Can work independently with a variety of print</li> <li>-Can write basic information and extended responses, especially with sentence frames and scaffolds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Develop longer oral and written responses</li> <li>-Build sentence with adjectives and adverbs</li> <li>-Work with compound sentences</li> <li>-Expand the use of verb tenses, including future, past and perfect</li> </ul>
Advanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Use English in complex academic arenas</li> <li>-Comprehend detailed information in abstract topics with limited contextual clues</li> <li>-Have advanced vocabulary knowledge</li> <li>-Recognize language subtleties in multiple contexts and for varied social and academic purposes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Expand the use of verb tenses, including the past perfect and conditional tenses</li> <li>-Build complex sentences with transitional phrases and conjunctions, as well as prepositional phrases</li> <li>-As appropriate, work with morphological layers of the language, including Greek and Latin roots</li> </ul>

Note: Adapted from “Explicit Language Instruction,” by S. Dutro and L. Helman, 2009, *Literacy Development with English Learners*, p. 50. Copyright 2009 by the Guilford Press.

ELs that have little to no receptive or productive English skills would be considered to be at the beginning proficiency level of English. From there, they move from having little English to a basic use of English both productively and receptively and are moving into the early intermediate proficiency level of English. Both beginning and early intermediate speakers need many repetitions and concrete experiences to acquire the necessary vocabulary, language patterns and concepts to be able to communicate, read and write in English.

ELs at the intermediate proficiency level of English are able to comprehend information on familiar topics and are able to engage in expanded conversations. They can work independently with a variety of print and can write basic information and extended responses, especially when the tasks are supported through the use sentence frames or other scaffolds.

Advanced speakers of English are able to use English in more complex academic areas. They may need extra language support to acquire the more complex language structures and tenses, to learn academic English, to recognize and use advanced vocabulary, to recognize language subtleties in multiple contexts, and be able to use English for a variety of social and academic purposes.

### Oral Language Proficiency and Reading Development

Studies on oral language proficiency and its role in reading development have produced more questions than answers and many studies yield conflicting results. However, there are two prevailing views about the role that oral English language proficiency plays in the reading acquisition process for ELs 1) that oral language

proficiency is a skill that can be developed in tandem with reading comprehension, and 2) that English oral language proficiency is a skill that is essential before students can read with comprehension

The first view is that oral language is a skill that can develop in tandem with reading skill. Supporters of the first view claim that English learners can learn to read while simultaneously developing their oral language (Garcia, 2000; Geva and Petruelist-Wrigh, 1999 as cited in August, 2003). In this view, oral and written language is reciprocal in nature and thus makes it easier to transfer that knowledge across the two mediums (Yoro, 2007). Peregoy and Boyle use the term 'general language proficiency' to describe this reciprocal nature. General language proficiency is defined as the core of L2 linguistic knowledge that applies to both oral and written language use. Peregoy and Boyle explain the following about general language proficiency:

Listening, speaking, reading, and writing differ in many interesting ways and although it is possible to separately assess proficiency in each area, it can be argued that the four processes use a large core of common features drawn from the lexical, syntactic, and semantic systems of the language, the core defined here as general language proficiency. Like first language learners, second language learners need to differentiate, refine, and extend their knowledge of the social functions, discourse conventions, and rhetorical strategies available in oral and written L2. However, each instance of language use, oral or written, both develops and draws upon the reservoir of general L2 language proficiency. (1991, pp. 38)

Researchers who adhere to the idea of general language proficiency say that general L2 proficiency is the foundation for both oral and written performance, the positive correlations reported between oral language and reading performance can be explained by their common dependence upon general L2 proficiency. Research seems to suggest that low oral language proficiency is related to low reading performance (comprehension) and high oral proficiency is related to high reading performance. General language proficiency can even place a “ceiling” on reading comprehension and may halt an ELs ability to progress through more complex levels of text (Peregoy & Boyle, 1991). Supporters of the first view of oral English language proficiency (Lesaux, Kiefer & Rivera, 2006 as cited in Yoro, 2007) claim that comprehension and reading instruction can be used as the medium for developing oral language proficiency. This view suggests that English learners learn English from reading and direct instruction in the reading process and components such as phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension gives them access to academic language development and comprehension skills thus improving their oral language skills (Yoro, 2007).

Goldenberg (2011) goes on to say that even a student who speaks no English might be able to learn the sounds of the language, how to segment words into smaller units, how to associate those sounds with letters, and how letters/sounds combine to form words. He goes on to say that if the instruction is done well and if it is combined with vocabulary teaching and other types of second language instruction, that this could make a positive contribution to both the English learners’ literacy and oral language development (p. 689).

Supporters of the second view claim that English oral language proficiency is prerequisite and that it is essential before students can read with comprehension.

Proponents of this view claim that EL students are able to keep up with their native-speaking peers with regard to decoding; however they lag significantly behind in terms of their vocabulary knowledge, reading comprehension and spelling patterns with more complex orthographic patterns (Yoro, 2007).

Researchers clearly agree that oral language and reading ability are interrelated; although, they continue to debate the exact nature of that relationship and the subsequent pedagogical implications.

#### The Role of Vocabulary in Comprehension

One aspect of oral language proficiency is vocabulary knowledge. The important role of vocabulary in reading comprehension has long been recognized. The vocabulary level of a native English speaker is highly predictive of his or her level of reading comprehension. The same holds true for English learners. Fountas and Pinnell (2006) assert that effective vocabulary instruction can help narrow the gap between children of high and lower socioeconomic groups. Vocabulary instruction has been shown to have a positive impact on reading comprehension; therefore, it is important that vocabulary instruction is part of every literacy program.

#### The Role of Academic Language in Comprehension

Academic language is the set of words, grammar, and organizational strategies used to describe complex ideas, high order thinking processes, and abstract ideas (Zweirs, 2014). Native English speakers and ELs are unlikely to hear academic language spoken

within the home. The theory of academic language grew out of the Basic Interpersonal Communication (BICs) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) theory which posited that oral language could be categorized into two types of language. The first being social language (BICS), sometimes referred to as the language a child would use on the playground, and the second being academic language (CALP) or the language used at school in textbooks, tests and in academic conversations (Cummins, 2003). ELs usually develop social English quite rapidly but academic language requires intentional instruction from teachers and can take much longer to develop. Oral language has moved from this dichotomous view to being understood now as existing more on a continuum of academic language.

There are a variety of purposes for using academic language at school. EL students use academic language to perform cognitive tasks, express thinking orally and in writing, inform their understanding of text structure, and engage in social and academic conversations. In the classroom, ELs often are required to use many of the following language functions:

- participate in discussions
- express social courtesies
- give and follow direction
- express needs, likes and feelings
- express action and time relationships
- predict
- clarify
- classify and compare/contrast
- describe, explain and elaborate
- draw conclusion
- make generalization
- sequence
- express cause/effect
- proposition/support
- summarize

As EL students' progress through the grades, academic language demands increase. Problems in reading can be a result of a limited vocabulary and syntactic knowledge of English. EL students often are missing the deep rich vocabulary and proficiency in the structures needed to carry out specific language functions such as comparing and contrasting, describing, predicting, persuading, analyzing, and critiquing. They often are unable to adequately explain their conceptual thinking—the language of academic success (Dutro & Helman, 2009). Because academic language exists in both oral and written form, lack of academic language knowledge can also make it difficult for ELs to comprehend while reading. Those students with a stronger command of academic language are more likely to access and comprehend a variety of academic texts and have the language to clearly explain their conceptual thinking in response to those texts.

English, specifically academic English, is considered a high-prestige language in the United States. Academic English is the language of access and decision-makers; it brings power to those with the ability to speak it. Not all individuals have access to or the ability to speak academic English. However, academic language instruction can empower EL students and bring about equity, giving them access to more educational, social, and employment opportunities (Dutro & Helman, 2009).

#### Factors Related to Demands of a Text

To this point, most of the factors influencing literacy development in a second language, specifically in the area of comprehension, have related solely to the EL learner. However, it must also be understood that there are also factors related directly to the text that can make a text more difficult to comprehend for an EL learner. All text places



certain demands on a reader depending on how they are written, illustrated and designed. There are ten factors that contribute to the difficulty of a text. These factors include genre/form, text structure, content, themes and ideas, language and literary features, sentence complexity, vocabulary, words, illustrations, and book and print features (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009). Genre/form can be thought of as the type of text and refers to a system by which fiction and nonfiction texts are classified. Text structure is the way that the text is organized and presented. The presence and combination of these text structures can increase the challenge for readers. Content refers to the subject matter of the text- the concepts that are important to understand. Content is considered in relation to the prior experience of readers. Themes and ideas are the big ideas that are communicated in the text. Language and literary features are the ways that the writer uses language and consists of similes, metaphors and idioms. Sentence complexity refers to the syntax of the language and the way the sentence is constructed. Simple sentences are much easier to process than more complex sentences. Vocabulary refers to the meaning of words. The more words that are accessible to the reader, the easier the text is to comprehend. Illustrations are the drawings, painting, pictures, and photographs that accompany the text. Book and print features are the physical aspect of the text such as the length, size, layout and tools like the tables of content, glossary, and index.

As the reading level of a text increases, the more difficult the text becomes with regard to complexity and accessibility. For English learners, linguistic factors such as language and literary features, sentence complexity, vocabulary, and words may pose extra challenges when confronted with a text. The more proficient the reader, the easier it

is for them to deal with all these demands of the text. Failing to adequately handle the demands of these ten factors in a text leads to a breakdown in comprehension for the reader. This inability to handle the increase in textual demands may be one contributing factor why transitional readers have difficulty progressing through this stage.

### Reading Comprehension Theories

Since the late 1970's, researchers emphasized the need for teachers to deliver effective reading comprehending instruction. The understanding of what that looks like has evolved over the years as new research emerges. Nevertheless, there is a broad base of agreement that the most important goal of reading instruction should be to develop readers who can derive meaning from the text (Pressley & Allington, 2015).

#### Comprehension Instruction of the Past

In 1978-1979, Durkin first raised the awareness about the need for reading comprehension instruction while observing third through sixth-graders in their classroom. She noted that teachers did much more assessing of comprehension by asking them questions or giving them worksheets than actual comprehension instruction. Teachers mentioned reading strategies, but provided little instruction on how to use them. Dolores' study changed the idea of what it means to effectively teach reading comprehension. Researchers now saw the need to further study comprehension and the way that it is being taught in order increase student's comprehension abilities (Pressley & Allington, 2015). In the 1970's, an important shift occurred with regard to reading comprehension. Reading comprehension was no longer seen as being a passive, receptive process, but

came to be seen as intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed through interactions with text and reader (August, 2003).

In the late 1970s and early 1980's, there was much attention paid to how meaning is represented in the mind and how these mental representations determine comprehension of a text for native speakers of English. Many new theories emerged to explain the reading comprehension process. These theories can also be used to understand some of the processes that influence the ways ELs comprehend text. The most notable theories that will be discussed are schema theory, transactional/ reader response theory, psycholinguistic theory, whole language theory, and metacognitive theory.

### Schema Theory

Schema Theory is a constructivist theory that explains how knowledge is created and used by the learner. According to schema theory, people organize everything they know into schemata, or knowledge structures. People have schemata for every topic in their lives, and each person's schemata is different depending on his/her life experiences. This theory suggests that the more elaborate a person's schema is on a topic, the more easily he or she will be able to learn new information in that topic area. This includes a person's schemata about language. Without existing schemata, it is very hard to learn new information on a topic. New experiences in a child's life can quickly change a child's existing knowledge about a topic. Schema theory asserts that existing knowledge structures are constantly growing and changing. For example, when a child who has only been exposed to small dogs now meets a Great Dane, his or her schema will quickly

change to accommodate this new knowledge (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). Researchers Anderson and Pearson (as cited in Tracey & Morrow, 2012) have asserted that differences in a reader's schemata are related to differences in comprehension. A reader who has very limited knowledge about the topic of the text will comprehend the text very differently than a reader who has extensive knowledge about the text.

Helman (2009b) refers to the existing knowledge and background experiences (schemata) that a child brings to with them to school as funds of knowledge. When student's knowledge and background knowledge are seen as strengths students are empowered to be successful at school. When their background knowledge and experiences are not valued, students are disempowered and their potential underestimated.

Schema theory has been influential in highlighting the role that existing knowledge (schemata) plays in the processing of new knowledge. The importance of activating and building a student's background knowledge prior to reading in order to increase comprehension is directly related to schema theory (Tracy & Morrow, 2012). For English learners and native English speakers, the development and role that schema plays is an important one. Research suggests that English learners may be at risk for decreased reading comprehension because they may not be familiar with the language conventions or cultural aspects of the text. They may have different cultural knowledge or experiences related to a certain content area or topic found in the text. Their schemata might even lead to them creating misconceptions due to sociocultural differences, cultural values and funds of knowledge. For example, a middle class white student reading a text

about a young child's sleeping difficulties and a dog may interpret the text as saying that the child's inability to sleep is due to him missing his pet dog and him wanting the dog to come to his room to comfort him. This interpretation is based on his understanding of American culture and dogs being lovable pets in the home. However, a Somali child may interpret the child's inability to sleep due to there being a dog in his room that is dirty and scary. This interpretation is based on his understanding of Somali culture and their view of dogs being unclean animals that would never be found in someone's home. Both readers are relying on their previous knowledge and cultural background experiences about dogs as pets, but interpreting and comprehending the text in drastically different ways.

#### Transactional /Reader Response Theory

Rosenblatt (1978) expanded on schema theory, to the field of reading comprehension with her Transactional/Reader Response Theory. According to this theory, every individual is unique with regard to what constitutes his or her schema in any particular area and therefore every reading experience and way that they comprehend a text is unique (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). No two people will comprehend the text in the exact same way since each person has unique sociocultural experiences that influence the way they make meaning and interpret the text. Pearson explains this about comprehension:

Meaning (or comprehending) is something that resides neither in the head of the reader (as some had previously argued) nor on the printed page (as others had argued). Instead, meaning (or comprehending) is created in the transaction

between reader and document. This meaning resides above the reader-text interaction. Meaning is therefore, neither subject nor object nor the interaction of the two. Instead, it is transaction, something new and different from any of its inputs and influences (2011, pp. 33).

Helman (2009b) also emphasizes the role that sociocultural factors play in literacy development. She explains that the sociocultural aspects of teaching and learning cannot be ignored. Students bring many things from home to the classroom, which include a cultural heritage with norms and values, a home language, ways of interacting that feel natural, and goals and aspirations. A teacher also brings his or her own sociocultural values, beliefs, and cultural background that can impact their disposition towards working with EL students. Personal factors such as an EL's cognitive abilities, motivation to learn, personality, age, cultural background, and experiences play a role in literacy learning as well.

### Psycholinguistic Theory

Psycholinguistic theory is based on the assumption that reading is primarily a language process. This theory helps explain why Helman's (2009b) linguistic factors such as phonology, syntax, morphology, and vocabulary have such an impact on the literacy development for ELs. Readers rely on language cueing systems to help them read text rapidly and figure out unknown words. These systems include the use of syntactic, semantic, and graphophonic cues. Syntactic cues are those related to the grammatical structures or syntax of a language. When readers use their knowledge about the structure of the English language they are better able to predict the next word in the

text. Semantic cues are those related to the meaning of the words and sentences. When readers use their knowledge of vocabulary and the meaning of the story they are better able to predict the next words in the text. Graphophonic cues are those related to visual patterns of letters and words and their corresponding sounds. When readers use graphophonic cues, they are again able to predict the next word based on its visual pattern and corresponding sounds in the text (Tracey and Morrow, 2012). Good readers use all three of these cueing systems simultaneously to help them figure out an unknown word or self-correct their reading when an error is made. Good readers also use their cueing systems to monitor themselves while they read. An analysis of a reader's miscues, or reading errors, can show which cueing systems the child relies on as well as which cueing systems need further development.

Psycholinguistic theory also claims that readers use their knowledge about language, and the world in general, to drive their thinking as they engage in the reading process. A central idea in psycholinguistic theory is the idea of the reader making and testing hypotheses as he or she reads. The reader is constantly making and testing these predictions about what the text will say based on their knowledge of language.

Pearson (2011) summarizes Psycholinguistic theory in five points saying that it 1) emphasizes the use of authentic reading materials rather than worksheet during reading instruction, 2) encourages texts that contain natural language rather than phonetically constrained language. 3) provides the understanding that the way a reader is processing the text can be understood in light of the kinds of errors they are making while reading, 4)

emphasizes the readings as a language process, and 5) stresses the readers as a person who was already a reader rather than someone who will become a reader.

### Whole Language Theory

Whole Language Theory is rooted in and extends the ideas found in Psycholinguistic Theory. Whole Language Theory suggests that reading, like oral language, is a natural process and that children, especially English learners, will acquire both more successfully if exposed to high quality literature and literacy environments. Whole Language Theory is grounded in the belief that listening, speaking, reading, and writing are all interconnected and that advances in one area will promote the advancement in another area. Because of this interconnectedness, whole language theory seeks to design literacy and language activities that promote the development of all four domains for both native speakers and ELs (Tracey & Morrow, 2012).

Helman (2009b) explains that schools that utilize quality instructional programs and effective teaching practices, like those related to whole language theory, have the ability to increase achievement for ELs. Teachers that intentionally design a variety of classroom activities with the reading, writing, speaking and listening needs of ELs in mind will foster both their language and literacy development as well their love for learning.

### Metacognitive Theory

Metacognitive Theory is another pivotal theory related to reading instruction and reading comprehension for both native speakers and ELs. Metacognition is the process of thinking about one's own thinking. Researchers have studied the use of metacognitive



strategies since Durkin's ground breaking study in 1978-1979 (Braunger & Lewis, 1997; Dole, Roehler & Pearson 1991; Kucan & Beck, 1997; Pressley, 2000 as cited in Serafini, 2013). The study of metacognition was a way to understand the reading comprehension process and helped change the way reading comprehension was taught in the classroom. Researchers found that efficient readers use a number of metacognitive strategies during their reading to help them understand the text. When cognitive strategies are employed, it increases the likelihood that a child will comprehend the text. Some of these cognitive and metacognitive strategies include working memory, phonological processing, metalinguistic awareness, rereading, activating background knowledge, adjusting reading speed, and the ability to judge when and how to use each strategy based on the difficulty of the text. Research has shown that the same cognitive and metalinguistic areas predict reading difficulties for ELs and native English speakers (Helman, 2009a). In general, native English speakers and ELs that have poor comprehension were found to use far fewer metacognitive strategies while reading than readers with good comprehension (Tracey & Morrow, 2012; VanKeer and Vanderlinde, 2010).

#### Reading Comprehension Defined

The definition of reading comprehension has changed in light of contemporary research. In fact, many sources omit the definition of reading comprehension altogether. Most of the definitions below define reading comprehension based on what the readers does while engaging with the text.

### Hoover and Gough's Definition

Hoover and Gough (1990) base their definition of reading comprehension in light of their comparably simple view of reading. They define reading comprehension simply as the combination of word decoding and listening comprehension skills. They asserted that if readers could decode the words on a page, they would be able to monitor what was being read to them orally and understand what they were reading. In this view, listening comprehension, or the linguistic process involved in the comprehension of oral language, strongly constrain the process of reading comprehension. The identification of word meanings, the representations of sentences, the drawing of inferences within and across sentences, and the integration of information are all part of reading comprehension; the identification of underlying text structure is involved as well as getting the global gist of a text (as cited in Verhoeven, 2011).

However, recent research (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pressley, 2000 as cited in Serafini, 2013) on reading comprehension has shown that understanding what one reads involves more than just decoding plus oral language comprehension. Those who disagree with this view argue that just because readers can decode the words and have well-developed listening skills, this does not automatically ensure they will understand what they have read.

### Fountas and Pinnell's Definition of Comprehension

Fountas and Pinnell (2006) emphasize the fact that the ultimate goal of reading is to make meaning of the text. Thus, they define comprehension as the process of constructing meaning while reading. Readers are actively making meaning using a kind

of in-the-head problem solving. All the complex operations of the brain before, during, and after reading a text-cognitive, linguistic, sensory-motor, emotional, artistic, and creative- are operating as readers process texts. Fountas and Pinnell go on to say this about the critical nature of comprehension,

A highly literate person is constructing meaning all the time, while anticipating reading, during reading, during pauses from reading, and after reading- sometimes long after. A real reader tends to recall books read many years before and sometimes brings new understanding to those texts in the context of the present. Thus, we cannot speak of comprehension as simply the “product” or even the “goal” of reading. Comprehension is the vital, central core of the broader and more complex ability to reason (2006, pp. 4)

Fountas and Pinnell (2006) feel the term ‘comprehending’ more accurately describes the active ongoing processing of the reader while they engage with the text before, during and after, versus the more traditional term of comprehension which seems to imply that comprehension is something that is accomplished only when the reader is finished reading. Comprehending requires that the reader develops a processing system comprised of an integrated set of twelve strategic actions by which they are able to extract and construct meaning from a written text. Fountas and Pinnell categorize these twelve systems of strategic actions that make up the processing system into three categories: within, beyond, and about the text strategic actions. Within the text strategic actions include: solving words, monitoring and correcting, searching for and using information, summarizing, maintaining fluency, and adjusting while reading a text. Beyond the text strategic actions include: predicting, making connections, inferring, and

synthesizing. Thinking about the text strategic actions include: analyzing and critiquing of the text.

Fountas and Pinnell are the researchers that most commonly guide comprehension instruction in my district. Therefore, their work and research is cited numerous times and discussed in more detail than other literacy researchers. This systematic review and subsequent implications are strongly informed by their research and published work.

#### Cognitive or Psycholinguistic definition of Comprehension

From a cognitive or psycholinguistic perspective, comprehension is viewed as a process of constructing meaning in transaction with texts (Serafini, 2013). Here comprehension is defined in light of the reader using strategies while reading in order to make meaning of the text. He says that strategies are “cognitive and metacognitive processes that are deliberately and consciously employed as means of attaining a goal.” (as cited in Helman, 2009b). However, this definition can underscore the role that immediate and sociocultural contexts can play while reading (Serafini, 2013).

#### Serafini’s Definition of Comprehension

Serafini (2013) provides quite an expanded definition of reading comprehension which includes many traditional elements of reading comprehension but also includes elements of in the socio-cultural perspective on reading. He says reading comprehension is the process of generating viable interpretations in transactions with texts, one’s ability to construct understanding from multiple perspectives; including the author’s intentions, textual references, personal experiences, and socio-cultural contexts in which one reads. In addition, reading comprehension should also include 1) navigating textual elements,

including written language, design features, and visual images and other multimodal elements, 2) generating meanings in transaction with the texts, 3) articulating one's ideas and meanings within a community of readers, and 4) interrogating the meanings constructed in a recursive, socially grounded process.

Incorporating ideas from sociocultural theory, he explains that meanings are constructed during the act of reading; however, they are socially embedded, temporary, partial and plural. There is no objective truth about the text, but many truths, each with its own authority and its own warrants for viability aligned with particular literary theories and perspectives. The meanings constructed by readers at any one point in time are plural and open for reconsideration at another time when transacting with the text (Serafini, 2013).

#### Pressley's Definition

Pressley has done extensive research on reading comprehension and the cognitive-based comprehension strategies used by proficient readers. He offers another definition of comprehension that incorporates much of what Fountas and Pinnell, Serafini and cognitive researchers have said previously. Pressley asserts that comprehension happens both consciously and unconsciously. A skilled comprehender is an active processor who connects texts to their experiences and prior knowledge, attends to the elements and structures of literature, monitors their understanding, asks questions of the text as they read, previews or skims text before reading, attends to vocabulary, is able to articulate and negotiate meaning, constructs meaning as they read through texts, abstracts the gist from the text, processes the ideas in the text in light of their own prior

knowledge, and uses this prior knowledge to make inferences. They are actively processing the text before, during and after they read much like Fountas and Pinnell claim. They are both interpretive and evaluative often reacting to the validity of ideas in the text (Pressley & Allington, 2015; Serafini, 2013).

#### Definition of Reading Comprehension for this Paper

For the purposes of this systematic review, comprehension will be defined according to the latest understanding in the field, as the process of constructing meaning while reading a text. A more thorough definition for this capstone consists of these ideas: 1) that comprehension requires that the reader take an active role in extracting and constructing meaning from the text and 2) this extraction and construction of meaning requires that the reader utilize an integrated system of cognitive strategic actions both at the word and text level. These strategic actions, based largely on Fountas and Pinnell's work, are used in both word level comprehension and text-level comprehension skills and consist of the reader solving words, monitoring and self-correcting, searching for and using information, summarizing, maintaining fluency, adjusting reading to solve problems or fit purpose/genre, predict, make connections, synthesize, infer, analyze and critique, and 3) reading comprehension also consists of the reader's ability to understand a variety of genres, to recognize text structure, to have a wide knowledge of topics and subject matter, to analyze themes and ideas, to identify language and literary features, to recognize and decode printed words of a text, and to acquire a variety of complex sentences and academic vocabulary.

## Stage of Reading Development

### Henderson's Stages of Reading Development

Henderson developed a model that describes the integration or synchrony among reading, writing, and spelling (Bear & Smith, 2009). This model can be used to determine the stage of development in these three areas for each student. However, for the purpose of this paper, only the reading stages of this model will be shown and discussed.

Figure 2      The Stages of Reading Development				
Emergent →	Beginning →	Transitional→	Intermediate →	Advanced →
Early, Middle, Late	Early, Middle, Late	Early, Middle, Late	Early, Middle, Late	Early, Middle, Late
Figure 2. The Stages of Reading Development. Adapted from the "Synchrony of Literacy Development" by E. Henderson, 1981. In D . Bear and R. Smith, <i>The Literacy Development of English Learners, 2009</i> , p. 91, Copyright 2009 by the Guilford Press.				

All readers begin their reading journey at the emergent stage of reading, gradually moving into the beginning stage, then moving to the transitional stage, later to the intermediate stage, and finally to the advanced stage. Emergent reading behaviors are characterized by the reader understanding that: reading is a way to obtain information, letters make words and words are separated by spaces, you match one spoken word to one written word, words carry meaning and you read the words to know what the writer is saying, there is a difference between the print and pictures- pictures have meaning,

you read print from left to right, you write words so the reader will understand what you want to say (Clay, 1991; Pinnell & Fountas, 2009; Morrow & Gambrell, 2011).

It is during the earliest stages of reading where children develop an interest in books and a love for reading. Young readers often request that adults repeatedly read familiar books to them. This eventually leads to the child learning how to retell the story. The young reader retells the story by looking at the pictures, gradually gaining skills that allow him or her to point from left to right as they pretend to read. Eventually young readers gain enough skills that they can notice and point out some letters and words in the print. At this stage readers are beginning to develop comprehension skills. They are learning how to talk about books as they practice asking and answering questions about the stories they read (Clay, 1991; Morrow & Gambrell, 2011).

The beginning stage reader is increasing their use of phonics and decoding strategies. They are starting to use their background knowledge and knowledge of language syntax and language patterns to gain meaning from text. They reread, read on, and go back to gain meaning from the text. They can relate stories to their own thinking and share opinions of stories. They are able to share their favorite parts of stories and elaborate on why he or she likes it (Cappellini, 2005).

#### The Transitional Reading Stage

The transitional reading stage commonly refers to readers in 1<sup>st</sup> through 3<sup>rd</sup> grades. However, because readers move through these developmental reading stages at different rates based on their reading level, not according to grade level, the transitional stage of reading will now be referred to using the Fountas and Pinnell levels H-M.



Furthermore, English learners begin their literacy journey at all ages and in all grades so referring to the transitional stage of reading in terms of reading levels and not according to grade levels will ensure that the same type of reader is being discussed throughout.

#### Reading Stages and Grade Level/Text Leveling Program Correlations

The table below shows that native English speakers typically reach the early, middle and late transitional stage of reading between first and third grade. Stages of reading are often tied to text levels. Most texts used for literacy instruction are leveled using a text leveling program so that teachers can easily identify the difficulty of a text. Common text leveling programs used in schools are the Fountas and Pinnell text leveling system, the DRA (Diagnostic Reading Assessment) leveling program and the Lexile leveling program. The correlation between the three text leveling programs is shown in the figure below.

Table 2 Reading Stages and Grade Level/Text Leveling Program Correlations

Grade Level	Reading Stage	Fountas and Pinnell Levels	DRA Levels	Lexile Levels
1 <sup>st</sup> /2 <sup>nd</sup>	Early Transitional	H and I	14 and 16	200L-400L
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Middle Transitional	J and K	18 and 20	300-500L
2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup>	Late Transitional	L and M	24 and 28	300-500L

Notes: Adapted from "Concordance of Developmental Stages of Reading, Spelling, and Reading and Program Levels," by L. Helman, 2009, *Literacy Development with English Learners*, p. 94-95. Copyright 2009 by the Guilford Press.

### Characteristics of the Transitional Reader

When trying to identify the developmental level (emergent, beginning, transitional, intermediate, or advanced) of readers, it is important to look at the reading strategies they are using while reading and not rely only on information about their English oral language proficiency. It must be emphasized that many ELs already know how to read in their native languages. Students may possess many experiences with reading in their primary language that may not be evident when they approach a text in English (Cappellini, 2005). Teachers need to be able to look at the reading strategies students are using, regardless of their oral language level, in order to determine the appropriate developmental reading stage for an EL. A beginning speaker of English is not necessarily an emergent reader of English nor an advanced speaker of English.

The transitional reader can be described as a reader who:

- applies strategies from emergent and beginning stages to longer text
- reads silently most of the time
- has a large core of known words that are recognized automatically
- uses multiple sources of information while reading for meaning
- integrates sources of information such as letter-sound relationships, meaning and language structures
- consistently checks to be sure all sources of information fit
- does not rely on illustrations but notices them to gain additional meaning
- understands, interprets, and uses illustrations in informational text
- knows how to read differently in some different genres

- has flexible ways of problem –solving words, including analysis of letter-sound relationship and visual patterns
- reads with phrasing and fluency at appropriate levels
- predicts before and during reading
- makes connections to text, to other text and to prior experiences
- uses strategies for sustaining meaning and to gain meaning when stuck
- knows when meaning is lost; stops and uses strategies to regain meaning
- maintains meaning over longer passages and text with more complex story lines, plots and characters
- self-questions, infers and summarizes

This is by no means an exhaustive list but some of the strategies transitional readers must employ (Cappellini, 2005; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

#### Gaps in the Research

Researchers are still trying to understand the complex relationship between oral language proficiency and reading instruction. One major area of interest is the complex relationship between English (L2) oral language development and reading comprehension. Early researchers assumed that reading and writing were discrete skills and that in order for English learners to begin to read in a second language they needed some degree of English oral language proficiency by which they could build their reading and writing skills upon (Chu-Change, 1981, Matluck & Tanner, 1979, Talbott, 1976 as cited in Peregoy and Boyle, 1991).

However, as researchers began to study (L1) literacy they noticed that (L1) literacy developed simultaneously with that of (L1) oral language. Researchers then began to question the earlier assumption that a degree of (L2) oral language proficiency was needed before English learners could learn to read. It was suggested that for English learners, English oral language and literacy may be acquired simultaneously, much like that of native English speaking children learning to read. They also claimed that reading materials could actually help to develop English learners (L2) oral language proficiency (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983, Krashen, 1982 as cited in Peregoy and Boyle, 1991).

Current research seems to point to the idea that (L2) oral language and (L2) literacy develop side by side. However, two questions still remain 1) what exactly is the relationship between English oral language proficiency and reading comprehension for English learners and 2) what additional factors make it difficult for transitional readers to move through this stage?

In light of Helman's factors that affect second language literacy development, the framework which shapes this study, research shows that linguistic factors are not the only influences that affect the literacy development for English learners. Other factors such as sociocultural, psychological and educational are intertwined with linguistic factors to either help or hinder an English learner's literacy development. Factors that lie directly with the text such as the genre, text structure, content, themes and ideas, language and literary features, sentence complexity, vocabulary, words needing to be decoded, book illustrations, and print features can also impact reading comprehension for ELs.

## Summary

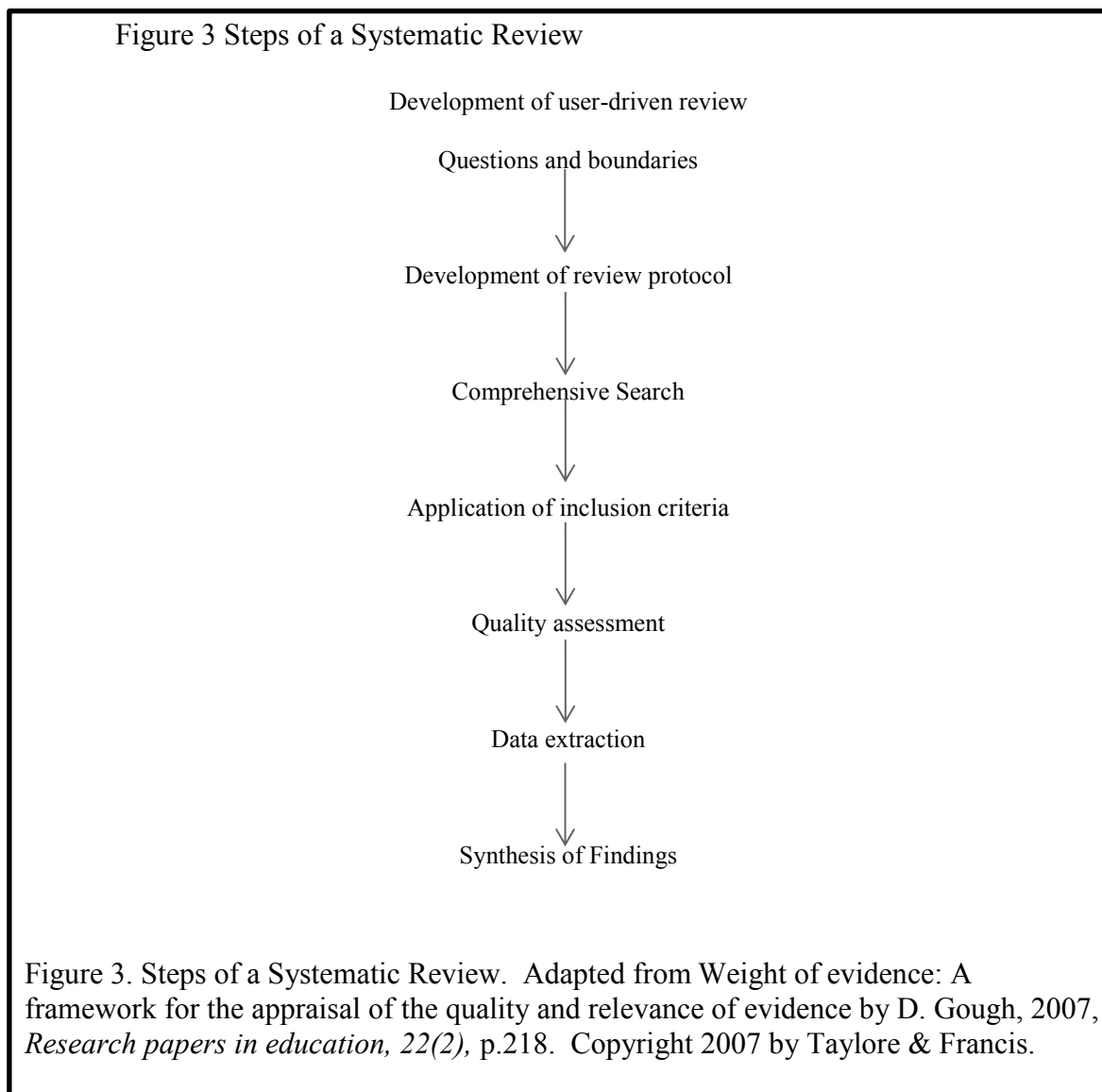
With the rapid growth in English learners and increasing demand for their academic achievement, it is imperative that there is an accurate understanding of the nature of the relationship between English (L2) oral language development and (L2) reading comprehension. It is also important that educators have a firm grasp on the linguistic, sociocultural, psychological, and educational factors that can impact ELs reading development as well. Educators must be familiar with the various theories that have emerged over time which describe how and why comprehension occurs. Also, mainstream teachers must familiarize themselves with the development of oral language and reading stages as well as the characteristics of a transitional reader.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

As part of my ongoing professional development as an English language teacher, I am constantly immersed in the literature on literacy development for native English speakers as well as the literature on literacy development for English learners. In recent years, the literature I was reading was well-known and credible, however, none of it seemed to address the comprehension problems I was seeing with my transitional EL readers day in and day out or provide any recommendations for how to instruct EL transitional readers in the area of comprehension. The literature was quite silent on the fact that underdeveloped oral language may be a significant factor in an ELs ability to successfully comprehend text at the transitional stage of reading. For this reason, I decided it might be advantageous to carry out an in depth systematic review of the literature to see what new findings might emerge.

In this chapter, the definition and steps for carrying out a systematic review are presented along with the purpose and goals of this particular review. The research questions are stated as well as well as a discussion of how the boundaries were set for the questions. Then a description of the method for carrying out the comprehensive search is explained. Next, the inclusion and exclusion and criteria are presented. The manner which was used to decide the quality and relevance of studies is discussed. Finally, the method for data collection, extraction and synthesis is presented.

The steps of a systematic review can be seen in the below.



#### Theoretical Framework

The current study uses a framework from Helman and seeks to explore the linguistic, sociocultural, psychological and educational factors that she asserts may have an influence on the literacy development of ELs. Throughout this systematic review, research, analysis, and synthesis continue to relate back to this framework.

### Development of User-Driven Review Questions and Boundaries

A systematic synthesis or systematic review means that the researcher formulates review questions that they hope to answer through the process of the review. The topic of literacy development for English learners is quite extensive. Therefore, it was important to make the parameters as narrow as possible to focus the study and limit the amount of research that needed to be reviewed to a reasonable, comprehensible amount. For this review, it was recommended that the questions be limited to one or two. Over time the review questions were refined and altered to be more clear and narrow. The initial research question posed required looking at literature related to all aspects of literacy development for English learners. That resulted in an impossible amount of studies to review and an unclear picture about the purpose of the review. The questions were then narrowed to look at the reading comprehension aspect of literacy only. Still there was too much literature to review and the purpose of the review still unclear. The question needed to be narrowed down even further.

Due to personal reflection and professional conversations, the questions about the relationship between oral language development and reading comprehension emerged. The parameter of transitional readers was also added to reduce the amount of material to be review and also reflect the age group that seemed to be affected. The final questions that emerged were focused enough to create a realistic amount of material to be reviewed and still yield important findings. The study addresses the following questions:



- 1) What is the relationship between English oral language development and English reading comprehension for English learners at the transitional stage of reading?
- 2) What additional factors make it difficult for transitional readers to progress through this stage?

#### Development of Review Protocol

The term systematic refers to the expectation that the research is undertaken with a rigorous and explicit method. The researcher develops a rigorous and methodical protocol that they will follow throughout the review. He or she undergoes a formal process for bringing together different types of evidence, both primary qualitative and quantitative, so that others can be clear about what is already known from research and how we know it. The researcher will use quantitative research as part of the review which contains precise, numerical data obtained using scales, tests, surveys, and questionnaires. He or she will also use qualitative data which contains more descriptive data obtained through interviews, observations and documents. The researcher may use databases, journals, books, as part of the search strategy. The researcher will then screen the studies to ensure that they meet the inclusion criteria. All research contains some inherent bias based on the assumptions made and the methods used so the researcher must use an explicit rigorous model in an attempt to minimize these biases as much as possible.

#### Procedure for Comprehensive Search and Data Collection

The first step at collecting a large body of studies for this review was to do an online search using Hamline University's Bush library online data bases as well as

become familiar with their ESL and education reference books sections. I used databases that were related specifically to the field of ESL and education. Reference books, handbooks, ESL journals and educational journals were also used extensively in this review.

### Databases Use

In order to collect relevant studies and literature (journal articles) regarding the relationship between English oral language development and English reading comprehension for English learners the following databases were used:

- Communication and Mass Media Complete
- Education Full Text (EBSCO)
- Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)
- Language and Linguistics Behavior Abstracts (LLBA)
- ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global Full Text
- PsycINFO

Subject headings were also used to limit the amount of results obtained related to literacy development and English Learners. These subject headings included words that define these group of learners (English learners, English language learners, second language learners, and language minority students) as well as words related to reading (literacy, transitional reader, transitional reading stage) and language (oral language, oral language proficiency, limited English proficient and second language learning).

### Journals Used

Journal articles proved to be the most useful and efficient way of collecting information that helped answer the research questions presented in this paper. Particular journals to note are the *Hispanic Journal of Behavior Sciences*, *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Reading and Writing* and *Research Papers in Education*.

### Professional Literature, Handbooks and Dissertations

Professional literature provided by my school district was also a valuable source of literacy information both relating to monolingual English speakers as well as ELs. Most notably are the various books and articles written by Fountas & Pinnell and Clay. Books from the Hamline library written by the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth, Allington, Helman, and Morrow & Gambrell also provided a wealth of information. Reference books and handbooks were also helpful in my search for relevant information. The Handbook of Reading Research was particularly helpful. Dissertations on similar topics also guided my search for relevant studies and served as a model for structure and format.

### Application of Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

#### Criteria for Inclusion of Studies

The topic of oral language development and comprehension is broad and the amount of research available is immense. For this reason, criteria needed to be put in place to limit the studies that would be reviewed. The study needed to meet the following criteria in order to be reviewed:

- Study must be done using second language learners currently receiving English language services
- Study must address issues of second language oral development in English
- Study must address English literacy development
- Study must address readers at the transitional stage of reading or if not noted then readers in grades 3, 4 or 5.
- Study contained participants in grades K-5
- Study must be related to research question
- Study must be no older than 25 years, preferably less than 10
- Study must be peer reviewed in a reputable journal

#### Criteria for Exclusion of Studies

If the study contained any of the following criteria it was excluded from the review:

- Study was conducted on monolingual native English speakers
- Study addressed first language literacy development in English
- Study addressed literacy development in a language other than English
- Study addressed reading comprehension at the emergent, early or advanced stages
- Study contained participants in grades 6-12 or adults
- Study was unrelated to the research question
- Study was published in a language other than English
- Study was not peer reviewed in a reputable journal

### Appraisal of Studies: Quality and Relevance

After the inclusion and exclusion criteria are put in place, the researcher must then make further judgments about the quality of the studies as well as its relevance in answering the research questions. While many studies met the above criteria for inclusion in this systematic review, some sources contributed better to answering the research question more than others. Many times sources that were more readable, were written by well-known researchers in the field of ESL, and were more current became more relevant and helpful in answering the research questions.

### Synthesis of Findings

The last step of a systematic review is to synthesize the findings, or in essence to answer the questions being reviewed in light of the research read, and then share the findings. The goal in communicating these findings is to move from merely a theoretical understanding of the information to action that will bring about some physical, social, economic or educational change (Gough, 2007).

A systematic review is a necessary step in order to glean and report out the major finding from the current research. The hope of this systematic review is to better understand the research and offer educational recommendations for teachers working with ELs in the area of oral language development and reading comprehension.

## CHAPTER FOUR: IN DEPTH REVIEW

### Introduction

Many variables emerged from the research that seem to highlight why reading comprehension is more difficult for EL students with limited oral language proficiency. While the research does emphasize the fact that limited oral language proficiency is a key reason why many ELs struggle with reading comprehension, it was not the only factor. A number of additional factors play an equally important role in second-language reading comprehension. The additional factors identified tend to fall into the following categories: factors related to oral language proficiency, factors that transcend oral and written proficiency, and factors that relate directly to the text.

This chapter is organized into findings from the review that fall first under factors related to oral language proficiency. Oral language proficiency factors include both receptive and expressive skills and include the knowledge or use of specific aspects of phonology (knowledge of the sounds of English), rhythm and cadence, vocabulary, syntax (word order), language forms (structures, verb tenses, grammar) functions of language used for both social and academic purpose, formal and informal discourse styles for speaking and writing, cultural contexts, discourse features, and pragmatic skills (Lesaux and Geva, 2006; Dutro & Helman, 2009). Next, is a discussion related to factors that transcend both oral and written proficiency. These factors are those can be thought of as lying “within” the individual reader such as vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge, metalinguistic awareness, vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge and experiences, and level of listening comprehension skills which may all

influence their ability to comprehend a text. Finally, the chapter highlights reasons that rest ‘outside’ of the child. These “outer” factors, mainly those relating to the text factors or how the text was written, have a substantial influence on reading comprehension for ELs. Text factors are the influences that lie with the types of texts the reader is being asked to read and discuss including the genre of the text, the structure of the text, the content and topics found in the text, the types of words that the reader must decode, the themes and idea found in the texts, the illustrations and book and print features.

In this systematic review, answers were sought to the following two questions:

- 1 )What is the relationship between English oral language proficiency and English reading comprehension for English learners at the transitional stage of reading?
- 2) What additional factors make it difficult for transitional readers to comprehend text and progress through this stage of reading?

In the following chapter, the findings of the systematic review in answer to these two questions are presented, organized by the above mentioned oral language proficiency factors, factors that transcend oral and written proficiency and factors related directly to the text which research has shown directly impact an EL’s progress through the transitional stage of reading.

The major findings presented in this chapter are

- Phonological and phonemic awareness have a great impact on reading comprehension for ELs.
- ELs with greater metalinguistic awareness typically have better comprehension than students with less developed metalinguistic awareness.

- EL's knowledge about the structures of the English language and their ability to use them in their oral language aids reading comprehension.
- An important relationship exists between listening comprehension and reading comprehension. Increasing an EL's listening comprehension through explicit instruction can positively impact their reading comprehension.
- Comprehension conversations at the transitional level require the student to demonstrate higher order thinking skills as well and a more sophisticated knowledge of and use of academic language functions.
- Biases may exist when it comes to the use of wide scale literacy assessments. Wide-scale literacy assessments designed for native English speakers have been found to be less valid when used with ELs. Teachers must use caution when interpreting an ELs assessment score results.
- Lack of vocabulary knowledge impedes comprehension, especially for ELs. Vocabulary demands increase dramatically at the transitional levels.
- Word errors greatly affect reading comprehension. ELs with weak comprehension made more miscues compared to strong EL readers. EL errors were typically related to morphology features not found in their native language. Also, the words that transitional readers are expected to solve at level H-M are more complex than previous levels.



- Unfamiliar content and a lack of background knowledge were more disruptive to comprehension than unfamiliar text structure for ELs.
- Figurative language and literary themes have deep cultural roots and make comprehending a text much harder for ELs.

#### Factors that Influence Comprehension Related to Oral Language Proficiency

Resting inside transitional readers are complicating factors that work to determine their success with reading. First and foremost for answering the research questions is oral language proficiency. Oral language proficiency is a broad definition that includes both receptive and productive skills. As outlined in Chapter 2, it encompasses knowledge in the areas of phonology (knowledge of the sounds of English), rhythm and cadence, vocabulary, syntax (word order), language forms (structures, verb tenses, grammar) functions of language used for both social and academic purpose, formal and informal discourse styles for speaking and writing, cultural contexts, discourse features, and pragmatic skills. The first major finding in this systematic review is that oral language proficiency has been shown to be a strong predictor of reading comprehension for English learners

#### Phonological Awareness and Phonemic Awareness

Another important finding is that phonological processing and phonemic awareness have a great impact on reading acquisition and comprehension for ELs especially with ELs ability to decode and manipulate the sounds of words (Wagner & Torgesen, 1987; Wagner & Torgesen, & Rashotte, 1999 as cited in Lesaux & Geva, 2006). A number of studies revealed that there is also a cross-linguistic relationship in

the developing phonological system of ELs. Researchers noted that ELs who were acquiring separate first- and second- language phonological systems were not acquiring English phonology in the same way that native English speakers do (Holm, 1999; Kramer & Schell, 1982 and Kramer, 1983 as cited in Lesaux & Geva, 2006). They noted that there was often transfer from the child's first-language phonological system into their second-language phonological system (English) which resulted in them producing errors. For the purposes of this review, phonology is considered part of oral language and includes the ability to recognize and produce the sounds and sound sequences that make up a language. There are many terms related to the broad category of phonology: phonological processing, phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, phonological segmentation and phonemic segmentation which will be discussed in more detail.

Phonological processing is the ability to use the sounds of language to process oral and written language; globally, one's phonological processing abilities have an impact on reading acquisition and comprehension (Lesaux & Geva, 2006). Phonological awareness is the ability to consciously attend to the sounds of language as distinct from its meaning and is an important precursor skill for both developing monolingual and multilingual readers, especially in the area of decoding.

Phonemic awareness is a less inclusive term than phonological awareness as is comprised of also phonological segmentation and phonemic segmentation. Snow, Burns, and Griffin explain this about phonemic awareness "it is the insight that every spoken word can be conceived as a sequence of phonemes" (as cited in Lesaux & Geva, 2006, p.55). A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in a spoken language. In English,

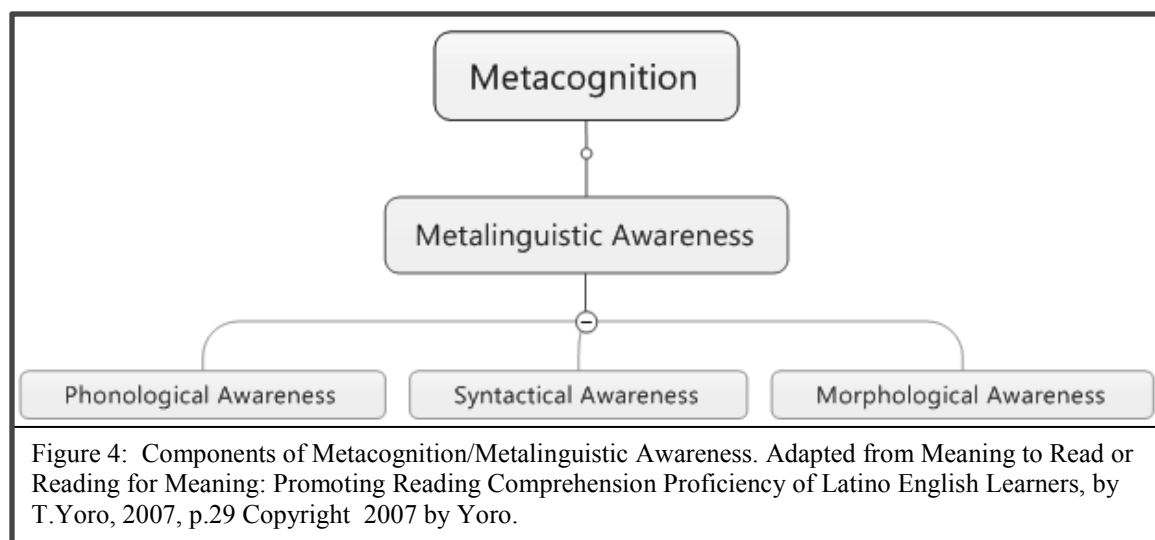
there are approximately 44, phonemes, or units of speech sounds. Because phonemes are the units of sound that are represented by the letters of the alphabet, an awareness of phonemes is key to understanding the logic of the alphabetic principle and thus to the learning of phonics and spelling (Lesaux & Geva, 2006). Phonological segmentation and phonemic segmentation refers to the ability to hear rhyming words, onsets and rimes, syllables and individual sounds of words or phonemes. It involves the isolating, blending, manipulating, and substituting phonemes in initial, medial, and final positions in words (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009). Issues can occur with phonemic awareness when second language learners have not fully developed their listening skills to hear the distinct sounds of English. Auditory discrimination is especially difficult when phonological differences exist between the native language and target language (English).

For example, Spanish speakers may encounter difficulties hearing and using eight English phonemes that do not exist in Spanish in their oral language production. These sounds include the five short vowel sounds, discriminating between /sh/ and /ch/, /v/ and /b/ and /s/ and /z/. Another source of difficulty for many ELs is the position of consonant clusters. In English, between 46 and 53 consonant clusters appear in the initial position of the word and more than 36 consonant clusters appear in the final position. Spanish is limited to 12 consonant clusters that can occur both in the initial word and syllable position. In addition, Spanish has no final consonant clusters such as ld and sk (August, 2003).

### Metalinguistic Awareness

Another significant finding is that that metalinguistic awareness is an important metacognitive strategy that has been shown to have a significant role in aiding comprehension for English learners (Velutino, Scandlon, Small & Tasman, 1991 as cited in Lesaux & Geva, 2006). ELs with greater metalinguistic awareness typically have better comprehension than students with less developed metalinguistic awareness. Helman (2009b) asserts that one of the most obvious complexities in learning to read in a new language is that ELs needs to understand the language in order to make meaning from the print. Metalinguistic awareness, a subcategory of metacognition, is an umbrella term that encompasses phonemic awareness, morphological awareness, and syntactical awareness (Yoro, 2007). Phonemic awareness, again, refers to the ability to distinguish and manipulate the sounds of a language. Morphological awareness is the ability to distinguish and manipulate meaning word parts. Syntactical awareness is the ability to reason consciously about the syntactic aspects of language and to exercise intentional control over the application of grammatical rules. Syntactic awareness is important for reading comprehension because it requires making predictions about the word that should come next in a sequence. Syntactical awareness involves the reader being able to discriminate and manipulate discrete syntactic units of language such as subject-verb agreement, pronoun referents, and verb tenses (Yoro, 2007; Lipka & Siegel, 2011). Instruction that helps EL readers apply what they about the sounds, syntax and morphology of the English language while reading has been shown to positively affect reading comprehension for ELs.

Figure 4: Components of Metacognition/Metalinguistic Awareness.



### Knowledge of Language Structures

Another important finding is that EL's knowledge about language structures in English and their ability to use them in their oral language has been shown to play an important role in reading comprehension (Clay, 2004; Garcia, 1998). Skilled readers use syntactic knowledge unconsciously while they read. This makes the reading process more efficient. Books contain sentence structures and language that do not often appear in everyday oral language. Students will talk, write and read using primarily the language structures that he or she controls easily in their oral language. For English learners, word order variation, relative clause formation, complex noun phrase and other complex structural differences among languages can mislead the ESL reader, especially in the early stages of reading (August, 2003). Garcia (1998) recommends that English learners receive explicit instruction on structural features of English that might not exist in their first language to help aid in reading comprehension (as cited in August, 2003).

When looking at the continuum of text levels, one can see that the sentences become increasingly more complex as the student moves up in reading levels. They no longer resemble every day speech. Starting with level H, the sentences may be up to ten words in length and contain prepositional phrases, adjectives and clauses. The sentences may contain questions in simple sentences and dialogue. There may be sentences with variety in order of clauses, phrases, subject, verb and object. Moving on to levels I and J, the sentences found in this level of text now contain more challenging sentence structures. This level text has many embedded clauses, and phrases. Compound sentences and sentences with nouns, verbs, and adverbs in a series and divided by commas can also be found. There may be occasional use of parenthetical material embedded in the sentences as well. In levels K and L, the sentence expands to more than fifteen words in length. There are more questions in the dialogue, some assigned some not. There is a wide variety of words used to assign dialogue, with verbs and adverbs that are essential to the meaning of the text. Finally, in level M, the text now contains a variety of sentence lengths with some very long and complex sentences containing prepositional phrases, introductory clauses, lists of nouns, verbs or adjectives. This level still contains questions and answers in dialogue. Sentences with parenthetical material and nouns, verbs or adjectives divided by commas are also present in this level (Pinnell & Fountas, 2011).

For the transitional reader to move through the transitional levels of text H-M successfully, ELs must be able to acquire a variety of complex sentences into their oral language and understand them when they reading. Explicit teaching and repetition of

new sentences structures are key when English learners are encountering unfamiliar syntactical patterns. When introducing a text for the first time, a teacher should demonstrate one or two of the more complex sentences found in the book. English learners will need extra practice saying some of the more difficult sentences or phrases prior to them reading a text. Some of these sentences that young readers may have difficulty with are compound sentences or sentences that contain many embedded clause. Also, text that contains idioms may also require extra practice and explicit teaching.

### Listening Comprehension

One finding that is supported by a small number of researchers seems to suggest that there is an important relationship between listening comprehension and reading comprehension. Increasing an EL's listening comprehension through instruction can positively impact their reading comprehension. The development of listening skills should be a part of an effective literacy program for Els. While the research is more limited on the role of listening comprehension and reading comprehension, there are a few studies that highlight the important relationship between listening comprehension and reading comprehension.

Dutch researchers Verhoven and van Leeuwe (2008) looked at the relationship between word decoding, vocabulary and listening comprehension in response to Hoover and Gough's simple view of reading comprehension as being a combination of decoding and listening comprehension. The participants of the study consisted of 2,384 children from 118 elementary schools in the Netherland. They came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, diverse linguistic backgrounds and degree of urbanization

characterizing the school setting. The type of literacy instruction that each of the participants was receiving was highly similar.

The results of the study indicate that the development of reading comprehension is impacted not only by the development of word decoding skills but also by listening comprehension skills and vocabulary. They indicated that listening comprehension, word decoding, vocabulary and reading comprehension are so intricately intertwined that the progress on one variable more or less automatically promotes progress in the other areas, however, the exactly nature of how that occurs is still unknown (Verhoeven & van Leeuwe, 2008).

Listening comprehension does play a role in reading comprehension and for this reason it is important that developing listening skills in English is considered a part of literacy instruction for ELs. Interactive read-alouds and literature discussions have shown to increase reading comprehension for ELs and native English speakers. Interactive read-alouds involve students actively listening to and discussing the text. The text is usually carefully selected by and read aloud by the teacher.

During read-alouds students participate in whole group and small group turn and talk discussions before, during and after the reading. When students are actively listening to and discussing a text in both the large group and small group conversations all of the strategic actions for comprehending are in operation. They are also gaining practice listening to and discussing text at levels higher than they may be able to access on their own. During a read-aloud the listener is freed from decoding and instead can focus on listening to the new vocabulary and language structures found in the book. The listener is



also supported by the reader's modeling of fluency, phrasing and stress (Fountas and Pinnell, 2011).

### Comprehension Conversations and Assessment

Two major findings emerged from this review related to comprehension conversations and the assessment of comprehension for transitional readers. First, the questions transitional readers are asked during comprehension conversations not only require the student to demonstrate higher order thinking skills but also a more sophisticated knowledge of and use of academic language functions than at the earlier stages of reading. Second, there are a number of biases when it comes to the use of wide scale literacy assessments with English learners such as comprehension conversations.

A common way of assessing comprehension is through a comprehension conversation. A teacher may ask the student a number of questions to elicit a series of responses to see if the reader has successfully comprehended a text. They are asked to demonstrate their thinking using a variety of cognitive actions and academic language functions to predict, synthesize, compare/contrast, make connections to, infer, describe, explain and elaborate, sequence, express cause/effect, summarize draw conclusions and critique, and analyze the text.

Common questions that ELs often need to respond to during a comprehension conversation include:

- Think about what you know. What do you think will happen? (Predicting)
- What does this remind you of? Do you know anyone who is like a character in this book? (Making connections)

- Explain what you learned from this book? What were some important facts? How has your thinking changed? (Synthesize and Explaining)
- What was the writer trying to say? What do you think the author is telling us about this topic? Why do you think \_\_\_ did that? (Inferring)
- Who are the characters? What was the problem? How was the problem solved? What was the author's message? What side do you think the author is on? Why? What lessons did you learn from this story? Give an example of description the writer used to show what \_\_\_\_ was like? How did the author help you understand this text? (Analyzing)
- What makes this a good book? What do you think about the illustrations? How else might \_\_\_ behave? Do you think this book sounds real? (Critiquing)

(Pinnell & Fountas, 2009).

While comprehension is largely a receptive skill it is almost always assessed in a productive manner, either in speaking or writing. For EL students, the ability to demonstrate their level of understanding of the text is directly correlated to their level of oral language proficiency. The reader may have good comprehension of the text, but be unable to find the language to adequately explain their thinking. Their ability to explain their level of understanding is often constrained by their limited oral language proficiency.

There are number of cultural and historical biases when it comes to the use of wide scale literacy assessments with English learners such as comprehension conversations. When students who are still acquiring English, participate in literacy

assessments designed for fluent native English speakers, the validity of the assessment results may be compromised. It is often very difficult to know whether their tests scores on English tests accurately reflect their content knowledge and skill or their limited English proficiency. Most wide-scale literacy assessments scores are also interpreted using testing norms based on native English speakers. These norms should not be used to interpret the results of an EL's literacy assessment. Educators need to be aware of these testing biases when using wide scale literacy assessments with ELs and interpreting the results (Garcia & DeNicolò, 2009).

#### Factors that Transcend both Oral and Written Proficiency

While the relationship between oral language proficiency and reading comprehension is undoubtedly an important one, there are also factors that transcend both oral and written proficiency that play an equally important role in aiding or impeding the reading comprehension process for an EL.

#### Vocabulary Knowledge

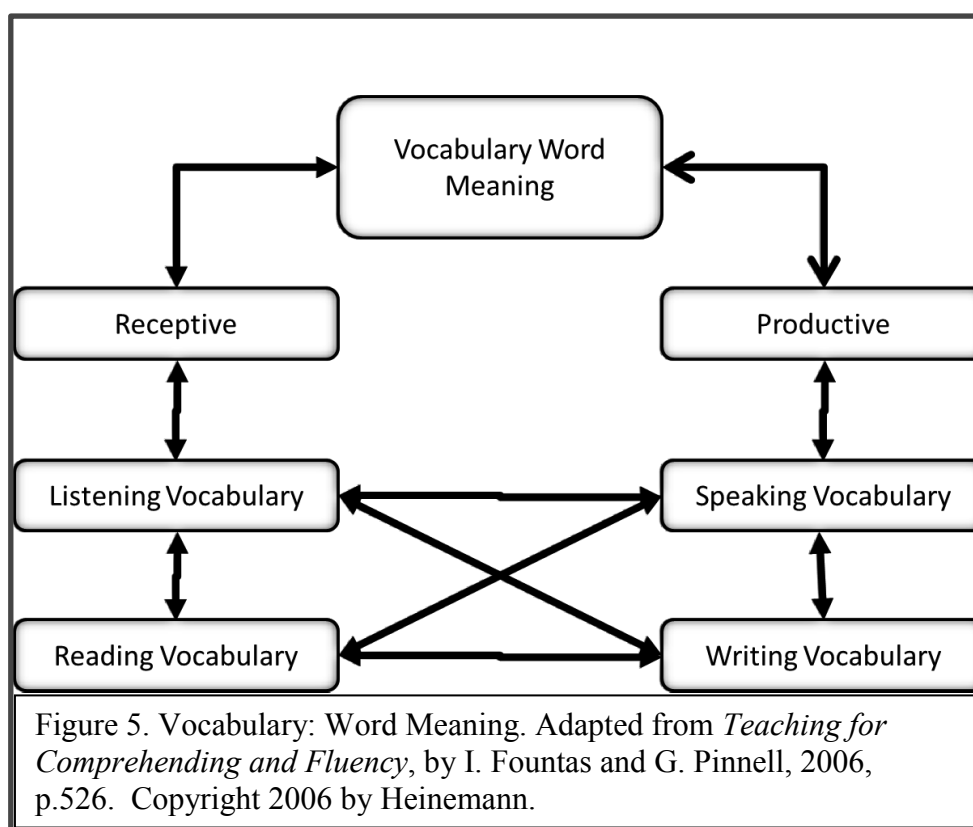
Vocabulary knowledge is critical to reading comprehension, and this factor exists both within the reader (what words the reader knows, uses, recognizes) and outside of the reader (what vocabulary is used in the texts transitional readers encounter). Hakuta, Butler and Witt (1999) noted in their study that limited word knowledge impedes reading comprehension. They found that vocabulary is an important factor in explaining the poorer performance in reading comprehension of ELs. Their study consisted of 24 native English speaking fourth graders and 27 fourth grade EL students from either Spanish or Vietnamese backgrounds. They were of low or middle socioeconomic status. Both

groups were classified as being either strong or weak readers depending on their reading levels. The study found that, even after controlling important factors, there were differences in the ability to infer/define word meanings in context and in the amount of metacognitive reasoning between native English speakers and ELs. There were differences in receptive vocabulary between native English speakers and ELs. However, they did not find differences in overall fluency in reading or the ability to identify the lexical category of a word between the two groups (as cited in August, 2003).

Referring back to the characteristics of text at the transitional levels H-M with regards to vocabulary, one can see that the amount of vocabulary and background knowledge required to comprehend the text increase with each level. In levels H and I, most of the vocabulary words are known by children through their oral language. However, this may vary for ELs depending on their language proficiency. A few content-specific words are introduced explained and illustrated in the text. There is a greater range of vocabulary and multi-syllable words. Complex word solving is required to understand the meaning of the words. In levels J and K, many content words are evident and are illustrated with pictures or other graphics. A wide variety of words are used to assign dialogue, with verbs and adverbs being essential to meaning. In level L, new content requiring prior knowledge to understand is evident. Some of the texts contain plots, settings and situations outside the reader's typical experiences. Some technical content that is challenging and not typically known can be found. New content is often accessible through text and illustration. Finally, Level M contains a lot of technical content that is challenging and typically not known. Most of the content is carried by the

print rather than the pictures and the content is supported or extended by the illustrations in informational text (Pinnell & Fountas, 2011).

The diagram on the following page shows that there are both receptive and productive types of vocabulary. Receptive vocabulary includes the words that we hear or read. Productive vocabulary includes the words we use to communicate as a speaker or writer.



### Background Knowledge and Text Content

Another major finding from the research relates to the reader's activation and application of background knowledge when comprehending a text. The knowledge a reader already possesses about the content, cultural context, and genre of a particular text

has been shown to be a primary factor that enables the reader to construct new knowledge from text. Background knowledge is essential if students are to determine main ideas of, generate emotional responses to, identify themes and ideas in, explain lessons from, and make connections between themselves and the author's message of the text (Yoro, 2007).

A study conducted by Droop and Verhoeven (2003) looked at the influence of culturally relevant background knowledge of text on reading comprehension for third graders in the Netherlands who were native Turkish and Moroccan speaking students and receiving instruction in Dutch. In this study, the Turkish and Moroccan speaking students and a group of native Dutch speakers with comparable decoding skills were given a text to read in Dutch that consisted of topics that were either culturally familiar to the language-minority students or drawn from Dutch culture. Some of the texts were considered linguistically simple or linguistically complex. The results showed that culturally familiar texts were easier to understand for both the Dutch monolinguals as well as for the language-minority students and texts that contained culturally unfamiliar topics were more difficult to comprehend.

Researcher (Garcia 1991; Jimenez, 1996, 1995 as cited in August, 2003) also noted that unfamiliar content has a severe impact of ELs reading comprehension. They found that bilingual children generally know less about topics in second language texts and differ significantly in their background knowledge needed for standardized reading text passages. They also found that Latino students knew less about specific topics. When differences in prior knowledge were controlled, Latino students did not differ significantly in reading text performances compared to their monolingual white peers.

When looking at the background and content knowledge that transitional ELs must have when they encounter levels H-M, it becomes clear that this rigor increases quite dramatically at this level. In level H, the background knowledge and topics are related to and may expand beyond home, neighborhood and school. The concepts of the text are accessible through the text. In Level I and J, some new content is introduced that children would typically not know. In Level K, the amount of new content presented to the reader increases. In order for the reader to understand the text, they must have a large a large supply of background knowledge on a variety of topics. The text at this level contains plots and situations typically outside the reader's experience. This means that the reader probably lacks the background knowledge necessary to understand this text and will need explicit instruction to build it prior to reading. In Levels L and M, there is technical content that is challenging and not typically are part of an EL's background knowledge (Pinnell & Fountas, 2011).

#### Factors that Influence Comprehension Related to the Text

As mentioned earlier, there are factors that related to the EL child themselves and those related to the specific text that makes it difficult for EL transitional readers to move through this stage of reading. When analyzing the difficulty of a text there are many factors that must be considered. These factors include: genre, text structure, vocabulary, words, and language and literary themes.

The Fountas and Pinnell text gradient is based on a twenty-six point (A-Z) text-rating scale of difficulty with the easiest text level being A and the most challenging being level Z. Each letter increases represents a small but significant increase in

difficulty over the previous level. A synthesis of the specific characteristics of levels H-M can be found in Appendix A. This information is based on the levels H-M using the Fountas and Pinnell text gradient system and continuum of literacy. This synthesis lists in detail the types of sentences the reader will encounter, the vocabulary words for which they must know the meanings of, the words they must recognize or decode, the subject or content matter that are important to understand, and the language and literary features the author uses.

### Word Errors

Three interesting findings related to word errors emerged in the literature. First, ELs with weak comprehension made more miscues or word reading errors, compared to strong EL readers. Second, the research concluded that many of the errors that ELs made were related to morphology features not found in their native language. Third, the words that transitional readers are expected to solve at level H-M are very complex.

Both monolingual and ELs can experience difficulties with comprehension because of deficient basic-level processing on the word level. They may have difficulty with the accuracy, speed, and automaticity of the recognizing or decoding individual words. When children cannot decode words quickly, there is no chance of comprehension because decoding competes with comprehension efforts for the limited attention capacity available for processing the text (Pressley & Allington, 2015). As children become more automatic with this word-level processing, their attention is now freed up allowing the reader to apply their attention to the processing of the whole text. This leads to greater comprehension.



Referring back to the characteristics of words that transitional ELs reader need to recognize or decode quickly, one can see that the word- solving demands needed to comprehend the text increase as well. In levels H- K, the text contains one, two and some three syllable words and the multisyllabic words are easy to take apart. Plurals, contractions, possessives, and compound words can be found along with a wide range of high frequency words. There are many words with inflectional endings. There are words with complex letter –sound and relationships and complex spelling patters. In levels L and M, the text contains a wide variety of high frequency words, plurals, contractions and compound words. The reader encounters numerous two and three syllable words and some words with more than three syllables. Many of the multisyllabic words are challenging to take apart or decode. Several words contain suffixes and prefixes. The text contains words have a wide variety of very complex spelling patterns (Pinnell & Fountas, 2011). However, comprehension involves much more than word level processing, and EL readers with automaticity with word-level skills still can have reading comprehension problems due to deficiencies in the other factors mentioned.

As part of that same study, Hakuta, Butler and Witt (1999) also noted that weak EL readers made more miscues while reading that greatly influenced their understanding of the text compared to strong EL readers. Weak readers made about ten word substitutions that changed the meaning per passage compared with fewer than two substitutions for strong EL readers. The miscues (errors) seemed to occur more frequently when reading content words rather than function words. When readers substitute one word for another

word, it changes the meaning of the text. The reader's comprehension of the text may be skewed in subtle or significant ways depending of the errors they are making.

Another interesting finding of this study concluded that miscues related to morphology can impede reading comprehension. The researchers found that there were differences in frequency and type of miscues among equally weak readers based on their first language background. Vietnamese-speaking students had more morphology-based errors than Spanish-speaking students and native English speaking peers. Much of these errors seemed to be errors related to aspects that are missing in the student's native language and were related to tense and number.

### Text Structure

One interesting finding worth noting is that studies that looked at the effects of both text structure and text content found that unfamiliar content (lack of background knowledge) was more disruptive to comprehension than unfamiliar text structure for ELs (August, 2003). An EL's comprehension can also be supported by their familiarity with the structure of a text and should not be neglected; however, this finding highlights the priority that building background knowledge instruction should take over text structure instruction.

Text structure refers to the overall architecture or organization of a piece of writing. Examples of common text structure include narrative, categorically or topically, description, chronological sequence, compare and contrast, cause and effect, and problem or solution (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009). In general, passages with a familiar text structure are easier to comprehend and recall for ELs. Therefore, ELs need to understand to be

able to identify the particular way the author is choosing to organize the piece of writing. They also need to understand the organization of paragraphs; that they have a topic sentence on which other sentences are meant to elaborate. Text structures are culturally determined and usually learned quite implicitly through exposure to text. There may be clear first-language effects on the types of text structures that ELs have been exposed to previously or find easy—most of which are most likely related to preferred organization in the first language (August, 2003).

### Figurative Language and Literary Themes

The last major finding is that figurative language and literary themes have deep cultural roots and make comprehending a text much harder for ELs. Similes, metaphors, and idiomatic expression are all examples of figurative language. ELs may need extra exposure to figurative language through carefully selected read-alouds and language instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). Language and literary themes include the ways an author uses language to enhance the literary quality of a text. Texts may require the student to process difficult literary language and unfamiliar themes. This includes the use of figurative language and themes that may not be related to or used in their culture.

### Findings Drawn from the Research

The following is a list of twelve major findings drawn from the research reviewed that help answer the research questions initially posed in this systematic review. The major findings are:

1. Linguistic, sociocultural, psychological and educational factors all work in a complex manner to either help or hinder literacy development for ELs.

2. ELs at the transitional stage of reading may need additional support to meet the increased demands placed on them at this level and move on to more advanced stages of reading.
3. Phonological and phonemic awareness have a great impact on reading comprehension for ELs especially with EL's ability to decode and manipulate the sounds of words.
4. ELs with greater metalinguistic awareness typically have better comprehension than students with less developed metalinguistic awareness.
5. EL's knowledge about language structures in English and their ability to use them in their oral language has been shown to aid reading comprehension.
6. There is an important relationship between listening comprehension and reading comprehension. Increasing an EL's listening comprehension through instruction can positively impact their reading comprehension.
7. Comprehension conversations not only require EL students to demonstrate higher order thinking skills but also a more sophisticated knowledge of and use of academic language functions .
8. Biases may exist when it comes to the use of wide scale literacy assessments. Wide-scale literacy assessments designed for native English speakers have been found to be less valid when used with ELs. Teachers must use caution when interpreting an ELs assessment score results.
9. Lack of vocabulary knowledge impedes comprehension. Vocabulary demands increase dramatically at the transitional levels.

10. Word errors can impede comprehension. ELs with weak comprehension made more miscues compared to strong EL readers. EL's errors were typically related to morphology features not found in their native language. Also, the words that transitional readers are expected to solve at level H-M are more complex than previous levels.
11. Unfamiliar content and a lack of background knowledge was more disruptive to comprehension than unfamiliar text structures for ELs
12. Figurative language and literary themes have deep cultural roots and make comprehending a text much harder for ELs

#### Summary

In summary, there is a complex relationship between oral language proficiency and reading comprehension. A variety of factors have been shown to either help or hinder the literacy development process for ELs, especially in the area of reading comprehension. This chapter was divided into three sections with each highlighting a major category of factors that have been shown to play a significant role in reading comprehension for ELs. The three categories were: factors related to oral language proficiency, factors that transcend oral and written proficiency, and factors that relate directly with the text. The final chapter wraps-ups the systematic review with a discussion about the instructional implications for mainstream teachers as well as a conclusion about how I plan to share these findings with colleagues in my school and district.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This systematic review analyzed and synthesized only a small sample of the body of the research available on the literacy development for ELs, specifically in the area of reading comprehension. However, we can draw some conclusions which may explain the potential reasons why transitional EL readers seem to struggle. We can also offer educational recommendations and instructional implications for mainstream teachers who wish to be more effective when working with ELs who struggle with reading comprehension in their classrooms. This systematic review sought to answer the following questions:

- 1) What is the relationship between English oral language proficiency and English reading comprehension for English learners at the transitional stage of reading?
- 2) What additional factors make it difficult for transitional readers to progress through this stage of reading?

### Instructional Implications for Educational Professionals

Below is a synthesis of the factors related to oral language proficiency, those factors that transcend oral and written proficiency and those that related directly to the text that have been found to play a role in an EL's ability to comprehend text at the transitional stage of reading. These factors, as well as others, must be considered when teachers are choosing a text and delivering reading comprehension instruction. The factors and questions in the table below can also aid teachers in reflecting upon their

current understanding of effective literacy instructional practices for ELs and how they can apply their new understanding in the mainstream classroom.

Table 3 Factors to Consider

<b>Factors to Consider</b>	
<b>Reading Factors</b>	<b>Questions to Consider</b>
Interest and Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is the topic of interest to students?</li> <li>- Will students find the text engaging?</li> </ul>
Background Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is the story or topic familiar?</li> <li>-What previous experiences with reading and reading instruction have students had?</li> <li>-How much experience have student had with this genre or type of text?</li> <li>-Do student know the vocabulary necessary to construct meaning from this text?</li> </ul>
Sociocultural Identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Is the text culturally connected to students?</li> <li>-Is the language simple and direct?</li> <li>-Is the vocabulary familiar to students?</li> <li>-Are there illustrations to help students understand the text?</li> </ul>
<b>Text Factors</b>	<b>Questions to Consider</b>
Length of Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do students have the stamina to read the text?</li> <li>-Will students be able to maintain interest in the text?</li> </ul>
Sentence complexity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do students have the types of language structures found in the text in their oral language?</li> <li>-What types of language structures will they need practice with prior to reading the text?</li> </ul>
Words	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What are the word-solving demands of the text?</li> <li>-What additional instruction will the reader need to decode the words?</li> <li>-What types of English morphological features may be missing from their native language?</li> </ul>
Text Type and Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Are students familiar with this type of text?</li> <li>-How much experience have student had reading this type of text?</li> <li>-Do student understand the structure of this text? Can they use the structure to help set a purpose or understand what they read?</li> </ul>
Page Layout and Illustrations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Do students know how to use pictures and other visual cues to help them read and understand?</li> <li>-Is the text considerate toward the students? Is it appropriate for their development and achievement levels?</li> </ul>
Text Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How much background knowledge do students have about this topic?</li> <li>-How much experience do they have with this content?</li> <li>- Is new content supported by both the text and illustrations?</li> <li>-Are students familiar with the format in which the content is presented?</li> </ul>
Vocabulary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Do students have background knowledge to infer the meanings of many of the words?</li> <li>-Are new words introduced in the text or supported by the illustrations?</li> <li>-Is the vocabulary of the text part of the reader's oral language?</li> <li>-Are there many technical or content specific words that may not be familiar?</li> </ul>
Language and Literary Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Do student have enough knowledge of language to make inferences and understand subtle messages in the text?</li> <li>-Do student understand the use of literary devices and how authors use them to tell the story?</li> </ul>

Note: Adapted from *Guided comprehension for English learners*, by M. McLaughlin, 2012, p. 14. Copyright 2012 by: International Reading Association.

## Instructional Recommendations

The following twelve instructional recommendations are based on the major findings gleaned from the research on oral language proficiency development and comprehension instruction for ELs. As you read these recommendations, reflect on your current instructional practices. What can you do to make your instruction be more effective for ELs in your classroom?

1. Affirm and build on the strengths that EL students bring to the classroom such as their native language, family heritage, abilities, background knowledge, experiences, and cultural values.
2. Teach ELs the components of literacy: specifically tailoring instruction to fit the needs of the EL in the areas of phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Sociocultural aspects of literacy such as building background knowledge should also be taught.
3. Provide explicit academic language and vocabulary instruction to support comprehension conversations.
4. Consider the demands of the text. What aspects of this text (sentence complexity, vocabulary, words, content/topic, text structure, language and literary themes) might make this text challenging for an EL to understand?
5. Find ways to prepare students ahead of time to work with new, unexpected, and unusual language structures and vocabulary in the text in their listening, speaking, reading and writing.



6. Create a culturally response classroom by choosing culturally relevant text and text topics that will motivate ELs to read. Student should be given opportunities to interact daily with high quality literacy materials.
7. Model and teach ELs how to be strategic (applying metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness skills) when reading and how to take an active role in constructing meaning from the text.
8. Provide frequent read- alouds that present new content, language patterns and vocabulary in context. Use read-alouds to build ELs listening and speaking skills and exposure to new vocabulary, language structures, literary language, fluency, phrasing and stress.
9. Activate and build background knowledge necessary to understand the text prior to reading.
10. Design and use literacy programs and models that have been shown to be effective with ELs.
11. Set high expectations for ELs in the classroom and provide them with opportunities to use language and literacy strategies in cognitively challenging ways.
12. Take time to actively reflect on the current literacy and language practices used in your classroom, school and district with ELs. How can you make your teaching be more specific to ELs? What resources are available? How can you accommodate multiple levels of language proficiency? What are your next steps in your professional development?

### Concluding Thoughts and Reflections

My initial reason for carrying out this systematic review was to find the answers that neither I nor my colleagues had to the following questions: Why did the EL students in our school seem to be stuck at the transitional stage of reading, especially in the area of comprehension? What is the relationship between oral language proficiency and reading comprehension? What other factors contribute to their inability to comprehend text?

Because of this systematic review work, I find I can now share researched- based findings when these professional conversations happen in my school. I may not have all the answers to why a particular EL student may be struggling to read, but I certainly can bring to the table some research- based reasons why transitional EL readers may struggle to progress in their literacy development and comprehension of text. I also am able to share with them sound instructional implications and recommendations that they can incorporate into their own classrooms.

In the future, I plan on sharing the findings gleaned from this systematic review with my EL and mainstream colleagues at my school by leading professional development workshops that focus on the literacy needs of ELs. My hope is that these findings will provoke teachers to more thoughtfully consider and discuss the variety of complex challenges that ELs face when it comes to developing literacy in a second language, particularly in the area of reading comprehension.

## Appendix A

## Text Level Factors (H-M)

<b>Text Level H</b>	
<b>Sentence Complexity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Some long sentences (more than ten words) with prepositional phrases, adjectives, and clauses</li> <li>○ Some sentences that are questions in simple sentences and dialogue</li> <li>○ Some complex sentences with variety in order of clauses, phrases, subject, verb and object</li> <li>○ Variation in placement of subject, verb, and adverbs</li> <li>○ Language structures of text not repetitious</li> </ul>
<b>Vocabulary</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Most vocabulary words known by children through oral language reading</li> <li>○ Some content-specific words introduced, explained and illustrated in text</li> <li>○ Wide variety of words used to assign dialogue to speaker</li> <li>○ Greater range of vocabulary and multi-syllable words</li> <li>○ Large numbers of high-frequency words</li> <li>○ Complex word solving required to understand meaning</li> </ul>
<b>Words</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Mostly one to two-syllable words</li> <li>○ Some three-syllable words</li> <li>○ Plurals, contractions, and possessives</li> <li>○ Wide range of high-frequency words</li> <li>○ Many words with inflectional endings</li> <li>○ Some complex letter-sound relationship in words</li> <li>○ Some complex spelling patterns</li> <li>○ Multisyllabic words that are generally easy to take apart or decode</li> <li>○ Some easy compound words</li> </ul>
<b>Content</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Accessible content that expands beyond home, neighborhood and school</li> <li>○ Concepts accessible though text and illustrations</li> </ul>

### **Language and Literary Themes**

- Amusing or engaging one-dimensional characters
- Some stretches of descriptive language
- Some texts with settings that are not typical of many children's experiences
- Almost all dialogue assigned to speaker
- Full variety in presentation of dialogue (simple, simple using pronouns, split, direct)
- Use of dialogue for drama
- Multiple episodes taking place across time
- Simple traditional elements of fantasy

### **Text Level I**

#### **Sentence Complexity**

- Some sentences (more than ten words) with prepositional phrases, adjectives, clauses
- Many sentences with embedded clauses and phrases
- Variation in placement of subject, verb, adjectives and adverbs
- Use of commas to set words apart (addressee in dialogue, qualifiers etc.)
- Sentences with nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in series, divided by commas
- Many compound sentences

#### **Vocabulary**

- Most vocabulary words known to children through oral language or reading
- Some content-specific words introduced, explained, and illustrated in text
- Wide variety of words to assign dialogue (said, cried, shouted, thought, whispered) and adjectives describing dialogue (quietly, loudly)

#### **Words**

- Many two to three-syllable words
- Plurals, contractions, and possessives
- Wide range of high-frequency words
- Many words with inflectional endings
- Some complex letter-sound relationships in words

<p><b>Content</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Some complex spelling patters</li> <li>○ Multisyllabic words that are generally easy to take apart or decode</li> <li>○ Some easy compound words</li> </ul>
<p><b>Language and Literary Themes</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Familiar content and some new content that typically children would not know</li> <li>○ Concepts accessible though text illustrations</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Amusing or engaging one-dimensional characters</li> <li>○ More elaborated description of character attributes</li> <li>○ Language characteristics of traditional literature in some texts</li> <li>○ Some texts with settings that are not typical of many children’s experience</li> <li>○ Variety of dialogue between more than two characters in many texts</li> <li>○ Multiple episodes taking place across time</li> <li>○ Simple, traditional elements in fantasy</li> </ul>

<b>Text Level J</b>	
<p><b>Sentence Complexity</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Many longer (more than ten words), more complex sentences (prepositional phrases, introductory clauses, lists of nouns, verbs or adjectives)</li> <li>○ Many sentences with embedded clauses and phrases</li> <li>○ Occasional use of parenthetical material embedded in sentences</li> <li>○ Sentences with nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in a series, divided by commas</li> <li>○ Variation in placement of subject, verb, adjectives, and adverbs</li> <li>○ Many compound sentences</li> </ul>
<p><b>Vocabulary</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Most vocabulary words known by children through oral language or reading</li> <li>○ Content words illustrated with pictures or other graphics</li> <li>○ Some new vocabulary and content specific words introduced that are explained and illustrated in the text</li> <li>○ Wide variety of words to assign dialogue (said, cried, shouted, though, whispered) and adjectives describing the dialogue (quietly, loudly)</li> </ul>

**Words**

- Many two to three syllable words
- Plurals, contractions, and possessives
- Wide range of high frequency words
- Many words with inflectional endings
- Many words with complex letter-sound relationships

**Content**

- Familiar content and some new content that typically children would not know
- New content accessible through text and illustrations

**Language and Literary Themes**

- Amusing or engaging characters, some of which have more than one dimension
- Elaborated description of character traits
- Language characteristic of traditional literature in some texts
- Some texts with settings that are not typical of children's experience
- Variety of dialogue (may be between more than two characters in many texts)
- Multiple episodes taking place across time
- Simple, traditional elements of fantasy
- Most texts told from a single point of view, with some having several points of view

**Text Level K****Sentence Complexity**

- Variety in sentence length and complexity
- Longer (more than fifteen words,) more complex sentences (prepositional phrases, introductory clauses, lists of nouns, verbs or adjectives)
- Many complex sentences with embedded phrases and clauses
- Variation in placement of subject, verb, adjectives, and adverbs
- Wide variety of words to assign dialogue, with verbs and adverbs essential to meaning

**Vocabulary**

- Content words illustrated with pictures or other graphics
- Some new vocabulary and content specific words introduced, explained and illustrated in the text
- Wide variety of words to assign dialogue, with verbs and adverbs essential to meaning

**Words**

- Many two to three syllable words
- Plurals, contractions, and possessives
- A wide range of high frequency words
- Many words with inflectional endings
- Many words with complex letter-sound relationships
- Some complex spelling patterns
- Multisyllabic words that are challenging to take apart or decode
- Some easy compound words

**Content**

- Familiar content and some new content that typically children would not know
- New content requiring prior knowledge to understand in some informational text
- Some texts with plots and situations outside typical experience
- New content accessible through text and illustrations

**Language and Literary Themes**

- Some complex and memorable characters
- Some figurative language (metaphor, simile)
- Some texts with settings that are not typical of many children's experiences
- Setting important to understanding the plot in some texts
- Complex plots with numerous episodes and time passing
- Simple, traditional elements of fantasy
- Most texts told from a single point of view
- May have more than one point of view within one text

<b>Text Level L</b>	
<b>Sentence Complexity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Variety in sentence length and complexity</li> <li>○ Longer (more than fifteen words), more complex sentences (prepositional phrases, introductory clauses, lists or nouns, verbs or adjectives)</li> <li>○ Questions in dialogue (fiction) and questions and answers (nonfiction)</li> <li>○ Sentences with nouns, verbs or adjectives in series, divided by commas</li> <li>○ Assigned and unassigned dialogue</li> </ul>
<b>Vocabulary</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Some new vocabulary and content specific words introduced, explained and illustrated in the text</li> <li>○ Wide variety of words to assign dialogue, with verbs and adverbs essential to meaning</li> <li>○ New vocabulary in fiction texts (largely unexplained)</li> <li>○ Words with multiple meanings</li> </ul>
<b>Words</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Wide variety of high frequency words</li> <li>○ Many two-to three syllable words</li> <li>○ Some words with more than three syllables</li> <li>○ Words with suffixes and prefixes</li> <li>○ Words with a wide variety of very complex spelling patterns</li> <li>○ Multisyllabic words that are challenging to take apart or decode</li> <li>○ Many plurals, contractions, and compound words</li> </ul>
<b>Content</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ New content requiring prior knowledge to understand</li> <li>○ Some texts with plots, settings, and situations outside typical experience</li> <li>○ Some technical content that is challenging and not typically known</li> <li>○ New content accessible through text and illustrations</li> </ul>
<b>Language and Literary Themes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Some complex and memorable characters</li> <li>○ Multiple characters to understand and follow development</li> <li>○ Various ways of showing characters' attributes (description,</li> </ul>



dialogue, thoughts, others' perspective)

- Figurative language and descriptive language
- Setting important to understanding plot in some texts
- Wide variety in showing dialogue, both assigned and unassigned
- Complex plots with numerous episodes, building toward problem resolution
- Simple, traditional elements of fantasy
- Texts with multiple points of view revealed through character's behaviors and dialogue

## **Text Level M**

### **Sentence Complexity**

- Some longer (more than fifteen words,) more complex sentences (prepositional phrases, introductory clauses, lists of nouns, verbs or adjectives)
- Variety in sentence length with some long and complex sentences
- Questions in dialogue (fiction) and questions and answers (nonfiction)
- Sentences with parenthetical material
- Sentences with nouns, verbs, or adjectives in series, divide by commas

### **Vocabulary**

- Some new vocabulary and content-specific words introduced, explained and illustrated in the text
- New vocabulary in fiction texts largely explained

### **Words**

- Many two to three syllable words
- Some words with more than three syllables
- Words with suffixes
- Words with a wide variety of very complex spelling patterns
- Multisyllabic words that are challenging to take apart or decode
- Many plurals, contractions, and compound words

### **Content**

- Some technical content that is challenging and not typically known
- Most content carried by the print rather than pictures
- Content supported or extended by illustrations in most

informational texts

**Language and Literary Themes**

- Some complex and memorable characters
- Various ways of showing characters' attributes (description, dialogue, thoughts, others' perspectives)
- Multiple characters to understand and notice how they develop and change over time
- Figurative and descriptive language
- Setting important to understanding the plot in some texts
- Various perspectives revealed through dialogue
- Wide variety in showing dialogue, both assigned and unassigned
- Complex plots with numerous episodes and time passing
- Plots with numerous episodes building toward problem resolution
- Simple, traditional elements of fantasy
- Texts with multiple points of view revealed through characters' behavior

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