



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION | UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA

**JOURNAL OF CURRICULUM, TEACHING,  
LEARNING, AND LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION**

Volume 3

Issue 1 *Special Issue: Socio-Political Issues in  
Education*

Article 11

December 2018

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## Recommended Citation

Penke, Heidi T. (2018) "ELL Students: Literacy Development and Language Development," *Journal of Curriculum, Teaching, Learning and Leadership in Education*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/ctlle/vol3/iss1/11>

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# ELL STUDENTS: LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

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*Abstract: The article is about the history of ELL students and the challenges they are faced with in an educational setting. Also literacy development is discussed as educators need to be aware of the importance of literacy development. The article also discusses language development and language acquisition for an ELL student.*

In America today, the minority population is rapidly growing. During the 1990's, the population of English Language Learners (ELL) in our schools doubled from 2.2 million to 4.4 million (Center for Professional Development and Services, 2003). At least 3.5 million children have been identified as limited in English proficiency and are now enrolled in U.S. schools (Magnuson, 2000; Miller & Endo, 2004). With the increase of minority students, the number of different languages spoken has grown and is rapidly changing. More than 10 million children live in homes in the United States where a language other than English is spoken (Jacobsen, 2006; Mora, 1999). Statistics show that while 80% of Limited English Proficient (LEP) children have the ability to speak Spanish, over four hundred first languages exist for the United States LEP population as a whole. All of these children face the challenge of learning academic skills and content, and most often not in their first language, in addition to developing proficiency in the English language (Crothers, 2008). Juggling all the different languages and diverse needs can be challenging for any classroom teacher. Teachers and schools are charged with educating every child, regardless of background, ethnicity, or language spoken at home.

The educational options for ELL students are guided by federal guidelines. In the Supreme Court ruling of *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), it was determined that it is illegal to place a child in a mainstream English class before he or she can "participate meaningfully" (Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, 2007). Under Title Six of the *Civil Rights Act* (1964), it is a violation to provide the same education to language minority students as to native English speakers (Crothers, 2008). All students are required to meet federal standards as outlined in No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2002) regardless of whether or not they are ELL students (Abedi, 2004; Kamps, et al., 2007; Protheroe, 2010; Slavin & Cheung, 2003). This requirement increases the pressures on teachers, schools, school districts, and states for ELL students to succeed (Kamps, et. al, 2007). Local school districts have the task of providing the appropriate program for the ELL students which could be a bilingual program, English immersion program, pull out program, or some other acceptable program in order for the student to be successful. As the increase in population of ELL students continues, so do the various barriers or considerations that educators must make. Immigrants from a Hispanic origin are the fastest growing group. Analysis of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test demonstrated that only 44% of Latino students scored at or above the "basic" level in comparison to 75% of Anglo students (Slavin & Cheung, 2003). Also, ELL students' needs are different than their English-speaking peers so the curriculum and instruction should look different (Mora, 1999).

Teachers need to help ELL students feel comfortable and safe in the school setting. ELL students should be viewed as assets to the learning environment rather than liabilities (Lewis-Morena, 2007). Overcoming the language and cultural differences will alleviate the ELL students from feeling alienated (Russell, 2007). The school must embrace and accept the responsibility of teaching the ELL population.

Understanding language acquisition and the fact that students need extra help and practice is essential for teachers (Glenn, 2002). Understanding how a student learns a new language and knowing the best strategies and practices allows classroom teachers to meet the needs of the ever-changing student population. Language acquisition is essential to learning a second language. ELL students usually are conversationally fluent within one to two years (Haynes, 2007; Meier, 1999). It takes seven to ten years for non-native speakers to academically be at the same level as their peers (Haynes, 2007; Lewis-Morena, 2007; Meier, 1999).

English language learners can be overwhelmingly challenging to teachers, especially when the teachers

have received no specialized training. Only California, Florida, and New York require preservice training in ELL strategies (Center for Professional Development and Services, 2003). Around 80% of limited English proficient students reside in California, Texas, New York, Illinois, and Florida (Jacobsen, 2006). Although the majority of ELL students reside in five states, training is needed for all teachers across the United States in order to meet the needs of our ever-changing population. Many strategies that are effective with ELL students can benefit all of the learners in the classroom. Learning strategies and best practices for ELL students will strengthen the teachers' skills and expertise.

There are an increasing number of strategies and programs to teach ELL students such as bilingual, English immersion, and pull-out programs. However, there is little research critically examining the specific models. More research is needed to determine if there is a relationship between the ELL pull-out program and the students' academic achievement. Research is needed to determine the effectiveness of ELL programs such as a pull-out program. This detailed study will examine a pull-out program and its effectiveness in order to best meet the needs of the ever-changing ELL population. Examining ELL students and the most effective programs is essential to our school systems and society since our population is ever-changing. The number of ELL students is rapidly increasing in the United States, and our public school system needs to be able to provide an appropriate education for our ELL students.

## **Literacy Development**

As soon as a child is conceived, the human body begins to develop rapidly. Babies grow quickly during the first few years of life. During the physical development, the child also learns how to interact with others and the environment. Every child is exposed to literacy in their own environment. Literacy exposure will help the child develop the skills to read, write, listen, and speak during their life. Some children experience their entire environment with one language. Other children are exposed to multiple languages simultaneously at home or at school. In this study, we are examining students who have grown up with two or more languages or who are learning a second language with their schooling.

### *Early literacy development*

As soon as children are born they are exposed to literacy in their environment. From environmental print to watching television to listening to people talk, literacy development is everywhere (Hiebert, 1981). The stages of literacy development start at an early age. Infants listen to voices and learn to recognize their own name. Infants and toddlers begin to communicate by making utterance and then using words and sentences (Hiebert, 1981; Ohio Statewide Language Task Force, 1990). As children grow, parents become the child's first reading teacher through read-alouds, singing songs, storytelling, and interactions (Bailey, 2006). A crucial element in early literacy development for young children is regular parent read-alouds. Regular parent read-alouds help children develop an interest in reading and a positive attitude toward reading (Bailey, 2006; Durkin, 1975; Zeece, 2007). By the time children are school-age, teachers assume the primary responsibility of explicitly teaching reading to the children.

There are five major elements that contribute to early reading success: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency (National Reading Panel, 2000; Slavin & Cheung, 2003). In preschool, letter identification is a strong predictor of later reading skills and letter knowledge helps children develop phonemic awareness skills. Letter identification and letter knowledge are early aspects of print awareness and literacy development (Dickinson, 2002; Hiebert, 1981; Ohio Statewide Language Task Force, 1990; Tunmer, Herriman, Nesdale, 1988). As children enter school, letter identification and letter knowledge skills are further developed. Phonemic awareness and phonics skills are explicitly taught so that children learn the letter sound relationships found in words. Children also develop print awareness and begin identifying sight words. As children are able to construct meaning from the words on the page, they begin reading for meaning.

From the very beginning, an achievement gap exists based on children's life experiences and the level of interaction that the children have with others, environmental print, and books prior to formal schooling. Research shows that if a child is struggling with reading development and is not caught up by third grade, then the child will continue to struggle and be behind their peers. The achievement gap can be closed in the crucial kindergarten through third grade years with systematic and diagnostic interventions. Literacy instruction needs to focus on the individual needs of each learner. Rather than using one reading program, the teacher needs the skills and knowledge to diagnostically analyze the needs of the learner and construct an effective instructional

plan (Ediger, 2004; Quick, 1998). “Increasingly, researchers are finding better results from teachers who take a balanced approach—that is, classrooms that offer rich literature, writing, lots of shared reading, and direct instruction in phonics as well—especially with children from disadvantaged backgrounds” (Quick, 1998, p.260). With the vast amount of research that exists about effective literacy instructional practices, it is imperative that schools examine the current instructional practices and interventions and determine if the instructional practices and interventions are meeting the needs of all the children with their literacy development. This is essential for children who come to school with no significant repertoire of literacy experiences and, therefore, face a lifetime of school struggles without thoughtful and immediate intervention. Using the best instructional practices and interventions is imperative for ELL students who are already charged with learning two or more languages.

### *English Language Learners and Literacy Development*

Literacy development is a challenge for all students, but it may be even harder for ELL students. ELL students are working at learning how to read, write, listen, and speak most likely in a different language than they already know or in a different language than spoken at home. Closing the achievement gap for ELL students is a challenge when their peers continue to make growth as well (Drucker, 2003). Their learning needs pose new challenges instructionally for an ever-changing population of teachers (Protheroe, 2010). Unfortunately, it takes seven to ten years for non-native speakers to academically be at the same level as their peers (Cummins, n.d.; Haynes, 2007; Lewis-Morena, 2007; Meier, 1999). Educators need to figure out how to overcome this obstacle and help the ELL students get caught up by the end of third grade.

Research shows that ELL students develop literacy skills by mastering the same five elements as English-proficient children which are phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. Good teaching is teaching for all. Many strategies that help ELL students will also help typical students (Drucker, 2003). Knowing this information, educators cannot assume that they do not need to do anything different for ELL students, but effective reading instruction will benefit all (Protheroe, 2010; Slavin & Cheung, 2003). ELL students need to be allowed time to absorb all of the new information as it can become overwhelming at times. All of these children face the challenge of learning academic skills and content, and most often not in their first language in addition to developing proficiency in the English language (Crothers, 2008). Educators need to provide instruction that has a balance between holistic and skills. Research shows that effective educators are able to draw on prior knowledge, make connections, and explicitly teach word identification, phonological awareness, and vocabulary (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). Engaging students in challenging theme-based curriculum can assist in developing academic concepts (Freeman & Freeman, 2003).

ELL students need the opportunity to become proficient at the English language and develop literacy skills. Unfortunately, ELL students must master the English language simultaneously as they develop literacy skills. This is the challenge and obstacle that most ELL students must overcome.

### *English Language Learners' Language Acquisition*

The ELL population poses a new challenge to educators. ELL students may or may not be having the same literacy experiences, but they may also be learning how to speak and read in a different language. Also research shows that language acquisition is essential to learning a second language (Protheroe, 2010). ELL students usually are conversationally fluent within one to two years (Drucker, 2003; Haynes, 2007; Meier, 1999). In order for ELL students to feel comfortable at school, they need to know key phrases that they can use to communicate with the teacher and their peers. This is known as conversational fluency. ELL students need to be able to effectively communicate in order for learning to occur, such as understanding directions and interpreting facial expressions (Colorado, 2007). Also, opportunities need to be created for greater student engagement and interaction to occur (Klingner & Edwards, 2006).

ELL students may exhibit different behaviors as they are beginning to acquire their second language. Those who have a strong foundation in their native language typically make better progress than those without a strong foundation (Protheroe, 2010). Some students who are outgoing may begin to imitate phrases and try to speak without hesitating or worrying about making mistakes (Zehler, 1994). Educators must remember that the fast talkers are not always the best readers (Cummins, n.d.). Other children may be silent for a period of time. This is frequently referred to as the silent period. The child may remain silent until they are sure of what they should say. Students may also be silent as they tune out from the overwhelming effort of learning a new language (Zehler, 1994).

Educators have the huge task of helping all of their students develop the literacy skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking at the same time that the ELL students need to be taught the English language.

Across the country the ELL population is growing and rapidly changing. School districts are trying to keep up with the changing needs by offering different and effective ELL programs such as a Bilingual program, English immersion program, or a pull-out program within the school district.

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