English Language Learners

Introduction

The number of English language learners (ELL) has grown significantly across the United States in the past 15 years. In 1990, 5% of public school students in grades K-12 were English language learners, that is, students who are classified by the government as Limited English Proficient (LEP) students and are eligible for support services. Today the figure is nearly 12% and it is estimated that it will continue to grow through the next century (National Center for English Language Acquisition (Goldenberg, 2008). Researchers project that by 2025, a quarter of the school-aged population in the U.S. will consist of ELLs (Van Roeckel, 2008).

Though the number of students is not a concern by itself, the fact that the academic achievement of ELLs tends to be low is troublesome. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the average scale scores for fourth-grade ELLs in reading were 36 points below non-ELLs (NAEP, 2007). 73% of ELLs in fourth grade scored below the basic level of proficiency (Fry, 2007). These students could not demonstrate partial mastery of the knowledge and skills in 4th grade reading material on the NAEP. Among ELL eighth graders, 71% failed to meet proficiency in reading, suggesting that these students could not demonstrate solid foundation in 8th grade reading material on the NAEP.

To some degree, group level score discrepancy is to be expected because many states identify students eligible for ELL services based on lower than average standardized test scores. This means that as students become proficient, they are no longer part of the ELL subgroup, which causes the scores of the subgroup to appear unusually low. However these achievement gaps are worrisome -- they don’t bode well for English learners’ academic futures. Teachers of ELLs are under pressure to reduce the achievement gap and move students closer to the academic proficiency level of English only students. It is essential, then, that teachers, as well as administrators and other school staff, understand the process of acquiring another language and how to support it in order to incorporate this knowledge into their instructional programs and practices.

Given the shifting patterns in U.S. demographics educators must consider two major points in delivering appropriate instruction (Brown & Sanford, 2011). First, educators must recognize the extent to which linguistic, cultural, and experiential contexts influence each student. These contexts should be accounted for systematically in the curriculum and instruction. Second, educators must plan and adapt appropriate assessment and instruction based on students with unique backgrounds. The purpose of this paper is to provide guidance in instructional practices to help teachers meet the needs of ELL students in reading and writing.

English Language and Reading Development in English Learners

English learners are a diverse group. Some ELLs are recent immigrants to the United
States and others have lived here since birth. Some have strong educational backgrounds and are highly literate in the first language, while some have never been schooled in their home language. Many refugees come from war-torn homelands and bring with them the trauma of mental and physical illness and spotty educational experiences. Some ELLs find American schools supportive and friendly environments that help them succeed academically and become fully-realized citizens, but unfortunately, many do not.

**Emergent Bilinguals**

English Language Learners are sometimes described in the research as *emergent bilinguals*. This term implies that the students are not only learners of English but that they are, in fact, adding English as another language to become bilingual or even multilingual people, able to continue to use their home language as well as their new language, English. Sometimes, this aspect of language learning is ignored by educators and educational policies that discount the students’ home languages and cultures by ignoring the ways that bilinguals children’s needs are different from those of monolinguals (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008).

It is important for us as educators to understand that though students may be attending schools where English is the primary language used, emergent bilingual students are also exposed to other languages at home, possibly both orally and in writing. They enter classrooms with varying degrees of oral proficiency and literacy in their first languages. Research has shown that exposure to a first language other than English can be both beneficial and challenging as students work towards adding English in schools.

**Bridging Home-School Differences**

Educators working in multiethnic, multilingual classrooms know the importance of building bridges between students’ experiences at home and at school. By using culturally responsive instruction that is relevant to students’ lives and by changing the way they interact with students, teachers are able to enhance students’ engagement, motivation, and participation in classroom instruction (Au, 2006). Teachers need to provide students with learning opportunities within a variety of participation structures involving whole class, small group, partner, and independent learning opportunities. A variety of experiences will help students by both replicating their home interactions and also broadening their experience to learn new ways of communicating with classmates and teachers.

Home language experiences can have a positive impact on literacy achievement. Oftentimes, language-minority parents express willingness—and often have the ability—to help their children succeed academically. For various reasons, however, schools underestimate and underutilize parents’ interest, motivation, and potential contributions. Teachers and administrators should be sure to reach out to families of English Language Learners to make them feel welcome at school.
**Reading Development**

Though a limited amount of research on the reading development of ELLs exists, it appears that the process of learning to read English as an additional language is similar in many ways to that of native English speakers (August & Shanahan, 2006). The same general processes are utilized. However, due to the fact that these students are adding a new language, it is likely that developing literacy in English will differ in some ways from native English speaking students and even from other ELLs.

The development of English literacy is a process that is cumulative and hierarchical for all students learning English. That is, some of the skills needed to become literate cannot be achieved until others have been mastered. For example, readers cannot comprehend written text if they do not first have fast and accurate word recognition skills. However, this process can also look quite different from student to student due to the complexity of factors at play. Factors such as age, previous school experience, literacy skills acquired in first language, cognitive abilities, proficiency in English listening and speaking, and similarities between the student’s first language and English make English literacy development dynamic and complex. For teachers, this means that our students’ literacy development may be erratic and unpredictable. No two students will follow the same path towards academic achievement in reading and writing. For example, students who have learned to read and write in their first language will likely acquire English more rapidly than students who only have oral proficiency in their first language.

**Cross-Linguistic Relationships**

Several studies have demonstrated the importance of building on children’s first language as a resource for developing English proficiency (August & Shanahan, 2006; Collier & Thomas, 2004). ELL students are able to take advantage of language skills developed in their first language as a bridge to English. One way this can work is by strategically using cognates, words that have the same linguistic origin and thus similar spellings and meanings, to develop reading comprehension in English. There is also evidence that students who develop literacy skills in their first language are able to transfer many of those skills to English. First-language literacy is related to word reading, reading comprehension, reading strategies, spelling, and writing.

It is important for teachers to take into consideration the transferability of some literacy skills when planning and providing second-language literacy instruction to students who are literate in their first language. Additionally, programs that provide opportunities to develop proficiency in their first language are recommended. Students who are instructed in their native language as well as in English perform better, on average, than students in English-only programs on measures of English reading proficiency.

**Effective Literacy Teaching for English Language Learners**

Teaching ELLs to read and write proficiently is a matter of importance and urgency to elementary teachers. English literacy is essential to achievement in all academic areas as well as
to becoming contributing members of society. There is a growing body of evidence to guide teachers to make the most powerful instructional decisions for their English learners. Findings from recent research reviews, when taken together, offer the following insights:

1. Teaching students to read in their first language promotes higher levels of reading achievement in English.
2. What we know about good instruction and curriculum in general holds true for ELLs as well.
3. ELLs require instruction modifications when instructed in English (Goldenberg, 2010, p. 22)

**Instructional Modifications for English Language Learners**

Though teachers may be set at ease in knowing that good instructional practices for general education students are the same as for ELLs, there is still work to be done. When teaching in English, instructional modifications are essential (Goldenberg, 2010). It is not enough to say that good teaching is good for all students.

One framework that can be used to guide instruction is presented by Lori Helman in her edited book, *Literacy Development with English Learners* (2009). Helman’s “Strategies to Support English Learners” framework, categorizes many of the research-based instruction techniques with four larger components: (1) explicit and systematic instruction, (2) engaging in a learning community, (3) highlighting connections, and (4) active construction of knowledge. This simple structure can provide clarity for teachers who are working to increase their effectiveness with ELLs.

**Explicit and systematic instruction**

English language and literacy instruction for English learners must be explicit and well-planned. The assumption that students will simply “pick it up” is erroneous. Though students learn much from their environment, there are aspects of language that should be included as instructional objectives. For example, explicit attention should be given to vocabulary development of everyday and academic words. Visual representations should be used, not just language-based explanation. Active student involvement, manipulation of letters and words, writing and spelling repeatedly, using cognates, and previewing lessons in the student’s first language when possible are ways to make language instruction explicit.

ELLs need instructional tasks that are tailored to the demands of their English language proficiency. We cannot expect students to understand or produce language well beyond their comfort level in English, however we also need to stretch their language by providing learning tasks that challenge students. ELLs need additional opportunities to practice language and academic tasks in order to build automaticity. They also need more opportunities for extended interactions with English speakers. Teachers can provide this “extra time” by designing small guided practice groups or partner activities that are differentiated from the regular curriculum.
Engaging in a learning community.

ELL students (and indeed all students!) learn best when they are in a comfortable environment in which they feel part of a learning community and where they can take risks without fear of mockery or insult. Speaking in a language that is not your own is challenging and difficult—trust is essential. When affective filters (such as fear and shame) are lowered, language minority students develop language more quickly (Krashen, 1982). ELL students benefit from predictable classroom routines that allow them to participate in regular ways with their classmates. A classroom with English learners, however, should not be a silent place. ELLs need heightened interactions with other students and language rehearsal. Often times, a multilingual classroom is one where lots of “busy” noise and physical activity can be observed—a vibrant learning community!

Highlighting connections

English Language Learners need instruction that explicitly links the “new” to the “known.” There are many ways that teachers can do this. For example, linking visual representations of words to oral language can easily be accomplished by writing or pointing to a word or picture while saying the word. This kind of link makes a connection for students that often leads to an “ah-ha” kind of moment when things click together. Another example of ways that teachers can make connections is by using a “whole-part-whole” approach. Starting with a whole concept or text, such as a picture book, before proceeding to skills based instruction, like phonics or grammar, helps students to have a global understanding and a place to link the new skills to. Then afterwards, linking those skills back to the whole again provides extra practice needed for automaticity and fluency.

Active construction of knowledge

ELL students who are instructed only using a “sit and get” approach, where the teacher talks and the student listens, often become disengaged in the lesson due to the cognitive overload of constant meaning making in a new language. This experience is frustrating for students and certainly doesn’t accelerate their language learning. Instead, teachers need to facilitate active constructions of knowledge where students are involved in their own learning and are making sense of new information for themselves. Teachers can do this by designing lots of hands-on activities, incorporating music and rhythm, and getting students using their whole bodies by acting out words and stories.

Teaching Student to Read in English

Recently, a review of the experimental research on reading instruction with English Learners was conducted by the National Literacy Panel (August & Shanahan, 2006). This review provides some direction for teachers regarding the best, research-based approaches to effective reading instruction. One key finding from this panel is that instruction in the key
components of reading (the “big 5”) is necessary—but not sufficient—for teaching language-minority students to read and write proficiently in English. This means, again, that good literacy instruction is a starting point, but that modifications must also be made.

The studies suggest that the basic sequencing of teaching is likely to be the same for language-minority students and native English speakers—with greater attention to word-level skills early in the process and more direct attention to reading comprehension later on. However, vocabulary and background knowledge should be targeted intensively throughout the grades.

Word-level skills in literacy, such as decoding, word recognition and spelling, are often taught well enough to allow language-minority students to attain levels of performance equal to those of native English speakers. However, this is not the case for text-level skill like reading comprehension and writing. ELL students rarely approach the same levels of proficiency in text-level skills achieved by native English speakers. The reason for this difference is oral English proficiency. Students who have well-developed oral proficiency in English are much more likely to be good comprehenders and writers. Specifically, English vocabulary knowledge, listening comprehension, syntactic skills, and the ability to handle metalinguistic aspects of language, such as providing definitions of words, are linked to English reading and writing proficiency. These findings help explain why many ELL students can keep pace with their native English-speaking peers when the instructional focus is on word-level skills, but lag behind when the instructional focus turns to reading comprehension and writing (August & Shanahan, 2006).

**Developing Academic English Proficiency**

Oral proficiency in English is critical to literacy development, however it is often overlooked in instruction. English learners can usually acquire conversational English within two or three years, however academic English requires six or more years to develop proficiency. Why does it take so long? One explanation is that students are exposed to conversational English at school and even in their communities and via media at much higher rates that academic English. Academic English, which presents new vocabulary, more complex sentence structures, and rhetorical forms, is not typically used much outside of school settings.

English language development targeting academic English is critically important for English learners. It is not enough to teach language-minority students reading skills alone. Extensive oral English development must be incorporated into successful literacy instruction. Literacy programs that provide instructional support of oral language development in English, aligned with high-quality literacy instruction are the most successful (August & Shanahan, 2006).

**Struggling Readers**

Just as with other students, there are some English Learners who have reading difficulties that set them apart from their peers. It is often difficult for teachers to discern whether a reading problem is related to individual differences or language status. As it turns out, similar proportions of ELL students and monolingual English speakers are classified as poor
readers. In fact, with the exception of English oral-language skills, the profiles of poor readers in the two groups are very similar. Both groups demonstrate difficulties with phonological awareness and working memory. Underlying processing deficits, as opposed to language status, are the primary issue for students experiencing word-level difficulties. That said, given proper instruction, some ELL students classified as learning disabled can achieve grade-level norms (August & Shanahan, 2006).

**Collaboration and Co-teaching**

The challenges for ELL students in school settings can be great. Co-teaching, where a general education teacher and an ELL teacher work closely together, makes it possible for students to engage in a classroom setting in which they have access to English language-rich environments and instruction. Co-teaching also increases instructional coherence by facilitating shared knowledge about what is taught between whole class and small group learning.

Other common models of ELL instruction, such as ESL pull-out, ask students to leave their regular classrooms to receive a specialized curriculum, usually in a small group of other English learners and often in small, closet-like spaces. With co-teaching, the ELL teacher and general education teacher work mostly in the classroom and flexibly in close-by hallways and small rooms. The teachers in this study described a “learning boost” for students that transpired when teachers taught side-by-side, sharing the same students and instructional space. The benefits of staying in the classroom are both sociocultural and academic. Students feel more included and less scared, experience a greater sense of community, and develop more varied relationships, including friendships with non-ELL students.

An ideal collaboration between ELL and general education teachers facilitates the integration of content-based English language teaching and ELL-accessible content teaching. That means that systematic planned language development is possible rather than just the inclusion of ELL students in the regular activities of the mainstream classroom. Successful co-teaching arrangements take into account that there are two curricula: that of English language development as well as the grade-level content. The goal is to incorporate language objectives into content lessons (Short & Echevarria, 1999). Having two teachers, each with an expertise in their curricular area, makes this goal much more doable.

Working with English Language Learners is challenging but also rewarding at the same time. Most teachers face this challenge with enthusiasm and learn much from the experience. English learners themselves have much to share with the classroom community and enrich the learning environment with lively cultural exchange and an eagerness for learning.

**Some useful websites**

American Institutes for Research (Education, ELLs) www.air.org/focusarea/education/?id=3
Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA)

www.ciera.org
References


Reading Assessment with English Learners

The purpose of assessment is to provide information that may be used to describe performance and make instructional decisions about students (Salvia, Ysseldyke, & Bolt, 2010). There are challenges to assessing reading ability and making eligibility decisions for students who are English learners. Educators must be willing to plan and adapt appropriate assessments based on English learners’ backgrounds (Brown & Sanford, 2011). In this section, we discuss the challenges inherent in reading assessment, evidence-based practices for assessing reading with English learners, and the link between assessment and instruction.

In order to obtain an accurate picture of student performance, the level of English and native language proficiency should be determined prior to testing (Salvia, Ysseldyke, & Bolt, 2010; Sandberg & Reschly, 2010). Testing in both languages, whenever possible will provide a more valid picture of student functioning (Sandberg & Reschly, 2010). Making educational decisions for English learners based on standardized assessments is problematic for several reasons. First, these tests are often norm-referenced and the norm group may not have included English learners. This lowers the reliability and validity of English learners’ test scores (Abedi, 2004). Second, content-area standardized assessments (e.g. Gray Oral Reading Test) become a measure of English proficiency for English learners (Sandberg & Reschly, 2010). Thus, when relying on psychometric tests it is difficult to discriminate between English learners with low English proficiency and students with learning disabilities, especially in reading (Abedi, 2006; Sandberg & Reschly, 2010).

Curriculum based measures (CBM) are a suitable alternative to traditional psychometric options. Educators use CBMs to assess student growth in core academic areas that are related to future success in school. A recent review of research on the use of CBM with English learners showed that oral reading fluency and maze tasks are suitable for educational decision-making and placement and intervention monitoring (Dominguez de Ramirez & Shapiro, 2006; Sandberg & Reschly, 2010). CBMs are sensitive to reading growth for EL students and are correlated with later reading achievement. Data suggest that CBM measures are strongly correlated with reading rather than language proficiency (Graves, Plasencia-Peinado, Deno, & Johnson, 2005) and have shown strong psychometric properties that validate their use for screening and progress monitoring (Baker & Good, 1995; Betts, Muyskens, & Marston, 2006; McMaster, Wayman, & Cao, 2006). Thus, using such measures with English learners is less problematic than many standardized assessments, although there is some standard error in every measurement. Concurrent use of CBM within a problem-solving model (Deno, 1989) can help educators identify English learners who are dually discrepant in reading - students who are making less progress and at a lower level than their peers. CBM can be used to create local norms for EL students and track their progress over time.

Formative Assessment
There is a dichotomy of testing purposes. The first type, summative assessment, refers to measures used after instruction to determine whether learning occurred. The second type, formative assessment, occurs during instruction to measure mastery to inform instructional decisions (Stiggins, 2005). In an assessment-for-learning perspective (Stiggins, 2005) different types of assessments should be used to document if students’ progress toward gaining the knowledge and skills required for passing state summative assessments. There is strong evidence that formative assessments are useful screening and progress monitoring tools (Gersten, Baker, Shanahan, Linan-Thompson, Collins, & Scarcella, 2007). Screening and progress monitoring tools are effective with both English learners and English-only speakers (Vanderwood & Nam, 2008). These measures are useful for identifying English learners who are at-risk for reading failure. Historically, educators would wait to assess English learners until they reached a reasonable level of English proficiency. However, it is important to assess English learners in phonological processing, alphabetic knowledge, phonics, and word reading skills during primary grades. These data show if students are making sufficient progress in the foundational areas of early reading and suggest which students need more support and in which areas.

EL students should be assessed more than three times a year whenever possible. English learners whose data suggest severe reading problems should be monitored weekly or bi-weekly (Gersten et al., 2007). Gersten and colleagues also noted that below-grade-level performance should not be considered normative for English learners. Students whose data suggest reading problems should immediately receive increased interventions. School-based teams should be trained to examine formative assessment data to link these data with evidence-based interventions (Gersten et al., 2007).

**Response to Intervention with English Leaners**

The data-based decision making that occurs within Response to Intervention models is promising for English learners (Vanderwood & Nam, 2008). The National Center on Response to Intervention recently published a manual on using screening and progress monitoring tools to improve instructional outcomes of English learners. Although the manual was written for English learners who speak Spanish, the results are transferable to other English learners provided that educators take into account other culturally specific factors (Brown & Sanford, 2011).

A three-tiered model of support is applicable for English Learners. The first tier includes quality core instruction and ongoing progress monitoring for all students in the general education classroom. That is, students in tiers II and III should still receive quality core instruction in literacy. Student progress is monitored with sensitive and psychometrically sound measures to determine which students need additional instruction. Current research suggests that quality core literacy instruction should occur for at least 90 minutes and should be effective for approximately 80% of students. When fewer than 80% of students are making sufficient
progress in the core curriculum, there is a system issue (Christ, 2008). Problem solving should occur at a class-wide or school-wide level and may address curriculum or instruction (Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden, 2007).

In a tiered intervention model, all English learners receive high quality, empirically based instruction as well as regular progress monitoring (Brown & Doolittle, 2008). Instruction and assessment must be developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate. Assessments should measure both native (L1) and English (L2) skills.

Students who are below benchmark standards on progress monitoring data collected in Tier I need supplemental instruction, which occurs at Tier II. Supplemental instruction at Tiers II and III must be matched to student needs. Interventions in Tier II may be standardized (e.g. all students scoring in a certain range on the progress monitoring measure receive a phonics intervention) or individualized based on problem solving data (Vaughn et al., 2003). Instruction in Tier II must be explicit, more intensive, and more supportive than at Tier I (Tilly, 2008). Additionally, literacy instruction at Tier II often occurs within small groups and lasts about 30 minutes. In a system with effective core instruction, approximately 15% of all students might need Tier II intervention.

Assessment for English learners to determine if Tier II intervention is needed should begin by ensuring that culturally and linguistically appropriate classroom instruction is provided in Tier I (Brown & Dolittle, 2008). Assessment measures and norms should be valid for decision making with English learners. For students in Tier II, (English speakers and English learners) progress-monitoring data should be collected more frequently and changes in instruction should address specific student needs. Students who make adequate gains cycle back to core instruction only, while students who continue to achieve at a lower level and rate move to tier III. Services at Tier II are often provided by general education teachers or reading specialists (Brown & Dolittle, 2008).

Students who, after receiving quality and evidence-based Tier I and II instruction, evidence a discrepant level and rate of growth from their peers are moved to Tier III. In some models, special education eligibility is considered for these students. Other models consider special education only after Tier III interventions are unsuccessful. For some students, intensive instruction is needed without the presence of a learning disability or need for special education. Instruction at this level is individualized and directly targeted at student needs based on assessment data (Torgeson, 2004). Accordingly, progress-monitoring data is collected most frequently in Tier III. If quality and appropriate instruction is occurring at Tiers I and II, approximately 5% of students will need more intensive Tier III intervention.

Assessments at Tier III should verify that the student received appropriate instruction in Tiers I and II and that students were given sufficient opportunities to learn (Brown & Dolittle, 2008). Special education or general education teachers may provide services but this should be in conjunction with the EL specialists in the building or district.
Learner Characteristics That Influence Assessment

Development

Learner development is an important consideration when assessing English learners’ reading ability. Considering development helps teachers understand their students in a holistic way (Helman, 2009a). This information is useful to determine the most appropriate assessment to effectively link instruction to assessment results. Literacy assessments should match a students’ developmental stage. Helman et al. (2012) discussed a developmental model of literacy skills that are outlined below.

**Emergent readers.** Students in this stage are learning about books, acquiring concepts about print/alphabetic knowledge, phonological awareness, and the alphabetic principle (i.e. letters represent phonemes that are part of spoken words). Students in this stage need opportunities to learn about and use English. For English learners in the emergent stage, educators should assess student concepts about print, letter recognition, letter-sound knowledge, phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, concept of word, and listening comprehension (Helman, et al. 2009)

**Beginning readers.** Beginning readers use phonemic awareness and alphabetic knowledge to read simple texts. These students have a developing reading vocabulary of 100-200 sight words and are becoming more fluent in their reading (up to 70 words per minute). Assessments of beginning readers should measure letter-sound knowledge, phonemic awareness, automatic sight words, listening comprehension, and accuracy/comprehension with leveled texts (Helman, 2009b).

**Transitional Readers.** These students can read with greater fluency (70-100 words per minute) and are able to read longer texts such as chapter books. Transitional readers focus less on the mechanics of decoding and more on the meaning of texts. These students may still be limited by vocabulary and should be taught at an instructional level that takes their comprehension into account. Students who are in the transitional stage are able to monitor and correct errors in both reading and writing, know how to decode new words in reading from their existing vocabulary, and use a variety of cognitive processes to learn more about reading and writing. Assessments at this stage should measure readers’ accuracy, comprehension, and fluency in connected texts (Helman, 2009b).

**Intermediate and Advanced Readers.** Students in these stages use reading in purposeful ways to learn about their world and are increasing their vocabulary knowledge (Helman, 2009b). Students typically enter these stages in the intermediate elementary grades although English learners with limited formal schooling may be on a delayed timeline. Moreover, EL students often show significant gains in reading until the conceptual content or language level becomes more difficult (Brown & Sanford, 2011). Assessments of EL readers in the intermediate or advanced stage should measure accuracy, comprehension, and fluency across multiple texts and genres.
Assessment of Oral Language Proficiency and Home Language Literacy

Similar to reading, oral language proficiency has been conceptualized as developing across a continuum. Reading instruction can begin when students enter school regardless of their English proficiency level. This instruction can occur in their native language, English, or both (Brown & Sanford, 2011).

It is important to note that there are two types of language proficiencies, basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP; Cummins, 1984). This dichotomy suggests that while students may appear proficient in social situations they may lack the language skills to complete academic tasks. English learners acquire BICS within 2-3 years while academic language is acquired within 5 to 7 years (Cummins, 1984). For English learners to be successful in school they must develop academic language (Rhodes, Ochoa, & Ortiz, 2005). When assessing language proficiency prior to reading, it is important to evaluate both BICS and CALP (Rhodes et al., 2005).

Students’ background experiences also impact assessment and instruction. Students’ country of origin and previous educational experiences will affect reading skills. Students who are proficient in their native language may develop academic language in English within 1-3 years (Brown & Sanford, 2011). English learners with language skills in their native language will benefit from instruction on English letter-sound correspondence and grammatical structures that do not exist in their native language.

Types of Assessments

The unique language development and background characteristics of English learners influence the type of assessments that will provide valid and reliable results. Assessment results can be used to screen and monitor progress as well as make instructional decisions. Teachers have relied on formal and informal assessments in their classrooms to monitor student progress and plan lessons based on students’ needs. Informal assessments are the ongoing tasks used in the classroom to measure growth, catch students before they fail, and help teachers adjust instruction.

*Informal measures.* Often called authentic measures, informal measures include classroom observations, home language proficiency assessments, writing samples, story retelling, and oral-miscue analysis (Bailey & Heritage, 2008; Garcia, 1994; Helman, 2009b). These measures provide useful information to make decisions about instruction and measure how students approach literacy tasks. Informal measures can also be used to assess vocabulary to ensure students are benefitting from instruction.

*Formal measures.* These measures include curriculum-based measures, basal reading program tests, and standardized tests of reading achievement. Tailoring instruction with English learners requires analyzing errors patterns (Helman, 2005; Garcia, ND). For example, low CBM-
Reading scores may result from limitations in vocabulary rather than low reading fluency, which suggest different interventions.

**Evidence Based Interventions (in a Multi-Tiered System)**

A recent Institute of Education Sciences report (Gersten et al., 2007) made five recommendations regarding providing interventions for English learners. The first recommendation, which targets the assessment-intervention link, is to screen English learners for reading problems and monitor their progress in the core curriculum. The panel reviewed 21 studies that examined the criterion-related validity of screening measures for English learners’ reading skills. These studies showed moderate predictive validity for screening measures of phonological awareness, letter knowledge, and word/text reading for English learners who spoke Spanish, Mandarin, Hmong, and Punjabi at home. It is interesting to note that many studies found that English learners performed at comparable levels to native speakers on measures of early literacy and connected text-reading skills. Quality core instruction is a linchpin for English learners learning to read similar to their native speaking peers.

Above we discussed the purpose and use of formative assessments with English learners. For students in early grades it is important to collect formative assessment data in phonological processing, alphabet knowledge, phonics, and word reading skills. Such screening data should identify students at-risk for later reading problems in fluency and comprehension.

The IES recommends that progress-monitoring data be collected for English learners more often than tri-annually. For students whose initial data suggest that they are at high risk for later reading problems, data should be collected weekly or bi-weekly. The same benchmarks can be used to determine risk status for English learners and native speakers, although particular attention to vocabulary and language knowledge should be given to English learners. These data are necessary for making decisions about instructional support and interventions to improve students’ reading skills. Formative assessment data are useful for both modifying and targeting instruction. Any instructional modifications should be aligned with ongoing high quality Tier I instruction.

Providing additional support for English learners does not imply disability. Students who do not meet benchmarks should not be automatically considered as having a specific learning disability. Further, it is not best practice to wait until English learners have greater oral language proficiency to intervene. Learning to read in two languages is a complex task and the additional intervention these students need reflects the increased difficulty of the process.

*Small group interventions.* The second IES recommendation, providing small group reading interventions, fits with the second tier of a multi-tiered system of support. These small groups should focus on the five core reading elements designated by the National Reading Panel. Of course, the type of instruction and intensity of instruction should be determined based on assessment data (both formal and informal). Explicit and systematic instruction is the most
effective type of instructional delivery in this tier.

English learners will benefit from the increased opportunities to respond, additional practice, and immediate feedback that occur during small groups. The intervention should occur daily and for at least 30 minutes (3 to 6 students per group). Students should be grouped with others who need the same skill instruction but English learners can and should be grouped with native speakers when appropriate. Interventions are selected based on the core elements of reading they support. Examples of effective interventions include the Vocabulary Improvement Program (vocabulary), and Enhanced Proactive Reading (fluency, comprehension), See further resources at the What Works Clearinghouse.

**Peer-assisted learning.** Along with small group interventions, research suggests that English learners benefit from peer-assisted learning opportunities. There is a great deal of evidence for peer-assisted learning strategies although work with English learners is still emerging. Based on the few randomized trials that exist, the IES report considered peer-assisted learning strategies a promising approach for English learners. Peer-assisted learning is useful in early and later grades, although younger children need more simple routines and explicit instruction on peer-based activities. These activities should occur for approximately 90 minutes per week and should be targeted on areas based on recent assessment data. Many teachers will replace independent seatwork activities with peer-based activities such as oral reading fluency with a guided discussion within dyads. In no way should peer assisted activities replace quality, explicit instruction from teachers.

**Vocabulary instruction.** Although most reading problems do not include adequate guidelines for vocabulary instruction, supporting English learners’ vocabulary development is essential for improving their reading skills, including reading comprehension. Evidence-based vocabulary instruction should be explicit and occur daily. Vocabulary instruction should also be emphasized in language arts, math, science, and social studies curriculum.

English learners will benefit from frequent vocabulary information that emphasizes age-appropriate definitions (Gersten et al., 2007). Vocabulary instruction is aimed at helping students understand word meanings so they can use those words in their communication and future learning. English learners will need additional instruction and perhaps more extensive instruction than recommended in many core reading programs. The IES panel recommends that vocabulary words be selected based on district curriculum, and that problem words identified through informal assessment data should be added to this list. This list will necessarily go beyond those provided in core-reading programs. The recommended number of words taught varies, but considering the need for intensive practice and review, approximately 8-10 words should be taught per week. It is important to note that critical vocabulary words for English learners will not always be identified in teacher guides. Facilitating English learners knowledge of everyday words that native speakers know is also important.
**Over-identification of ELLs in Special Education**

Students in ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minority groups are disproportionately represented in special education; typically this has been a problem of overrepresentation. However, Hispanic students (who also make up the largest group of English learners in the United States; Aud et al., 2010) are somewhat overrepresented in hearing impairments and specific learning disabilities and they are also underrepresented in other categories including developmental delay (Skiba et al., 2008).

In a study conducted by Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda (2005), English language learners in southern California were underrepresented in special education during elementary school, but they were overrepresented during secondary school. However, interesting patterns emerge when one investigates an English learner’s pattern of language proficiency. For example, English learners with limited proficiency in both their first and second languages were overrepresented in specific learning disabilities and language and speech disorders in both elementary and secondary school.

Acknowledging that there is both over- and underrepresentation among English learners in special education, begs the question – why? First, it is difficult to discern the role of language acquisition in academic difficulties. This may lead some schools to over-identify English learners (attributing learning difficulties to a disability) and may lead other schools to under-identify English learners (attributing learning difficulties to language). In an example of over-identification of English learners, one school re-evaluated English learners in special education and found that the learning difficulties of nearly 50% of these students were judged to be related to a factor other than a reading disability (Wilkinson, Ortiz, Robinson, & Kushner, 2006).

Second, many assessments used in schools underestimate the ability of English learners because these students do not have the linguistic or cultural knowledge needed to perform well (e.g., Ortiz, 2008). Finally, English learners generally perform lower on formal and informal measures than students who are proficient in English (Samson & Lesaux, 2009). Special education was historically viewed as a solution to this problem, while others tried bilingual education. Recent evidence suggests that most English learners are not learning disabled but they require more intensive high quality reading instruction to develop reading skills in English.

**References**


